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WORLD CUP 2022

Countdown to Qatar: An expert 'first look' at all 32 countries

August 2022

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In Pictures

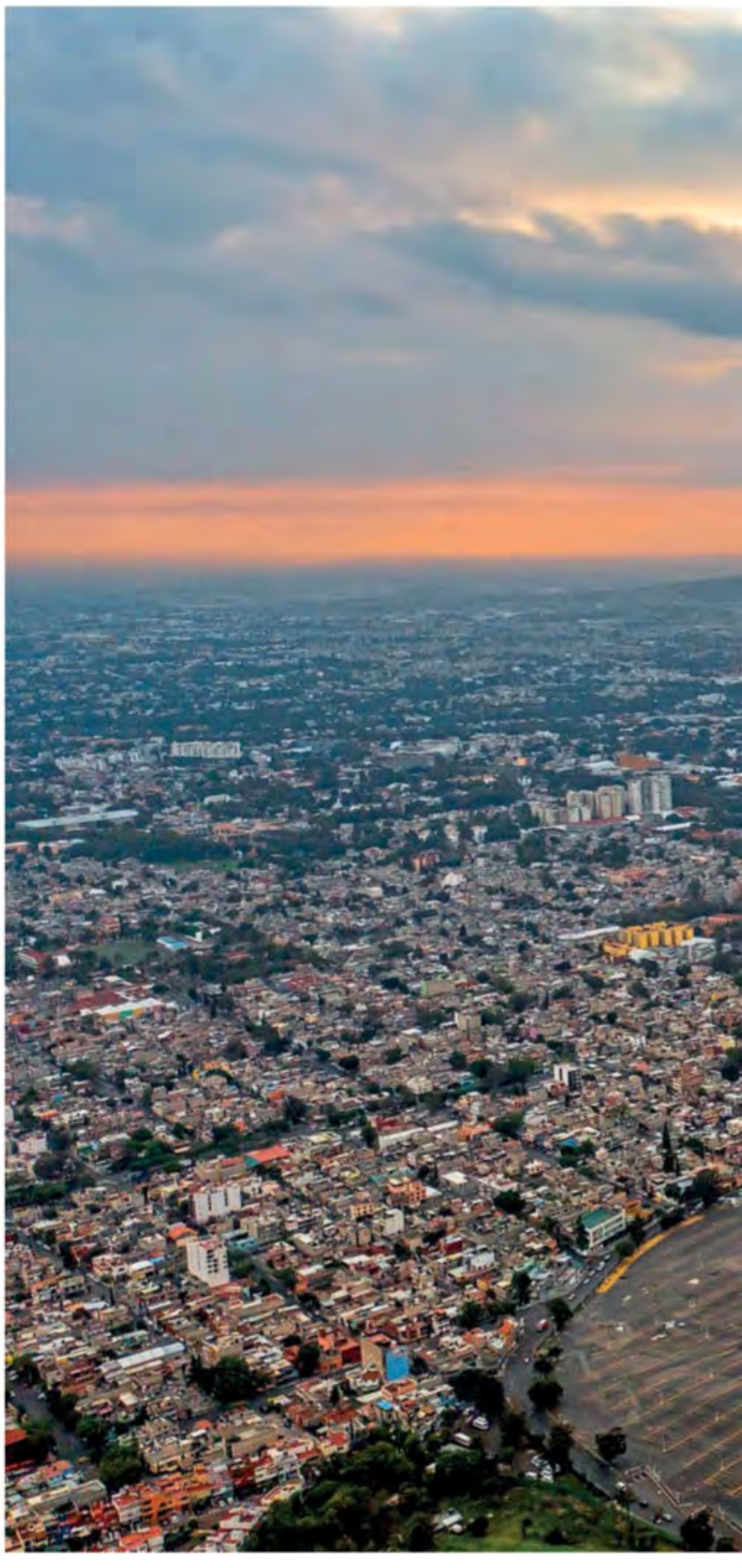
The global game caught on camera

Qatar and Wales... players of Australia, Wales and Costa Rica celebrate after qualifying for the 2022 World Cup, while Oleksandr Zinchenko sinks to his knees after Ukraine's defeat

Scotland...a Ukraine supporter dons a kilt during his team's 3-1 World Cup play-off semi-final victory over Scotland

United States...USA keeper Sean Johnson sports an orange armband during his side's friendly with Uruguay in a show of support for tighter gun controls

Germany...Sadio Mane juggles a football after completing his move from Liverpool to Bayern Munich



England...Lionel Messi holds onto the ball while surrounded by Italy players during the Finalissima, which Argentina won 3-0 at Wembley

Japan...Tunisia players celebrate after beating Japan 3-0 in the final of the 2022 Kirin Cup

Mexico...an aerial view of Mexico City's Azteca Stadium, which will host World Cup matches for a record third time in 2026

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FROM THE EDITOR

The World Cup might still be four months away, but now that all 32 teams have been finalised it's our chance to take a first look at every country that has qualified for Qatar.

Our global network of correspondents provide mini profiles of all 32 teams, including an overview of their qualification campaigns, strongest line-ups, tactics, star players and questions to answer between now and kick-off, while John Duerden has a travellers' guide to Qatar for anyone thinking of attending this year's showpiece event in the Middle East. How you intend to watch the World Cup (whether that be in Qatar or from the comfort of your own living room), we'd like to know. Visit **www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/WorldCup2022** to tell us your plans.

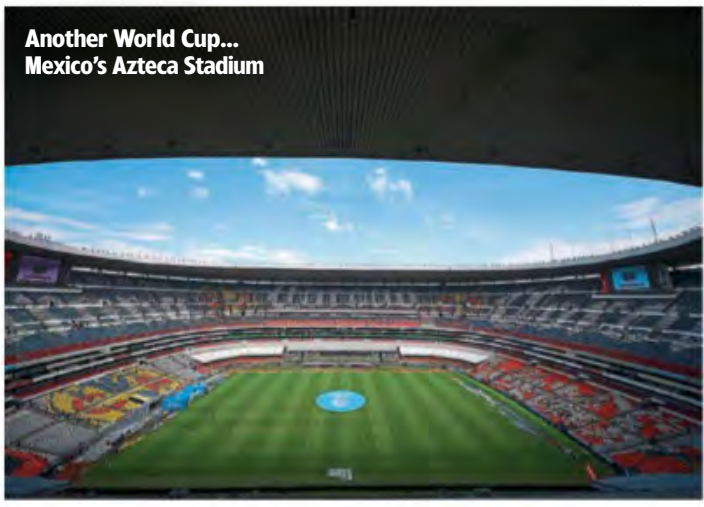
Our global network of correspondents provide mini profiles of all 32 teams…while there's a travellers' guide to Qatar for anyone thinking of attending this year's showpiece event

Teams' preparations for Qatar are already well underway, with June's international window highlighting who's hitting form and those nations that still have conundrums to solve (see Jonathan Wilson's column on the latest criticism of England's Gareth Southgate), so we provide updates with the latest from the UEFA and CONCACAF Nations League campaigns, plus the 2023 AFCON and Asian Cup qualifiers.

Aside from the World Cup, there's more reaction from the 2021-22 domestic campaign with a special report on the Europa Conference League's debut season and an EyeWitness feature from Slovakia, while we also look ahead to the new campaign with the latest signings and scheduled summer pre-season tours.

Although the imminent new season is firmly on the agenda (our next issue will be our regular new season special), the countdown to Qatar starts now, so stick with *World Soccer* over the coming months to ensure you're up-to-date with everything World Cup-related as we build up to football's biggest event.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor



Another World Cup… Mexico's Azteca Stadium

USA, MEXICO & CANADA

2026 World Cup venues confirmed

All immediate eyes may be on Qatar, but the 16 venues for the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada have also been confirmed by FIFA.

The final round of host selection saw seven US stadiums excluded from hosting, including Los Angeles' Pasadena Rose Bowl, which staged the 1994 World Cup final.

As well as being the first 48-team World Cup, the 2026 tournament will also be the first to be played across three different countries, while Mexico City's Azteca will be the first ground to be used at three different tournaments. New York's MetLife stadium is the most likely venue for the final.

Full list of venues:

USA
Atlanta (Mercedes-Benz Stadium)
Boston (Gillette Stadium)
Dallas (AT&T Stadium)
Houston (NRG Stadium)
Kansas City (Arrowhead Stadium)
Los Angeles (SoFi Stadium)
Miami (Hard Rock Stadium)
New York/New Jersey (MetLife Stadium)
Philadelphia (Lincoln Financial Field)
San Francisco Bay Area (Levi's Stadium)
Seattle (Lumen Field)

Canada
Toronto (BMO Field)
Vancouver (BC Place)

Mexico
Guadalajara (Estadio Akron)
Mexico City (Estadio Azteca)
Monterrey (Estadio BBVA)

"To me, this war is a catastrophe, a complete horror. Maybe they'll put me in jail or kill me for these words, but I'm telling it like it is"

Former Russia captain Igor Denisov speaks out against his country's invasion of Ukraine

FIFA

FIFA dismiss complaint against Ecuador

Ecuador will play at the 2022 World Cup after FIFA dismissed claims by Chile that they had fielded an ineligible player during qualifying.

The Football Federation of Chile (FFC) had alleged that Byron Castillo – who played in eight qualifiers – had faked his age and was in fact Colombian, not Ecuadorian, but FIFA dismissed the allegations.

The FFC are determined to appeal the decision, and insist that they will take the case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport if necessary.

FRANCE

Champions League final organisers should be 'ashamed'

Fans of both Liverpool and Real Madrid have described their experiences at May's Champions League final, as the inquiry into the chaotic scenes continued.

Ted Morris of Liverpool Disabled Supporters Association told the French Senate that "the authorities should be ashamed" after fans were treated "like animals" and with "contempt."

Morris' words followed UEFA's Martin Kallen, who said: "We know there were around, 2,600 fake tickets...but we cannot verify the figures given in France of 30,000-40,000."

A report by the French government concluded that a "chain of failures" had caused the problems at the Stade de France, which saw fans tear-gassed by police while queuing for hours outside the ground.

Liverpool have been collecting their own evidence from fans – inundated with 5,000 first-hand testimonies – with a resolution to the trouble seemingly a long way off.

Tear-gassed...a French policeman sprays tear gas at a Liverpool fan

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

4
Number of teams that could play in a revised version of the European Super Cup under new UEFA proposals.

10
Arrests made by Irish police as part of an investigation into alleged match-fixing in the League of Ireland.

5
Goals scored by Lionel Messi in one game as Argentina thumped Estonia 5-0 in a friendly.

Fab five ...Messi celebrates scoring v Estonia

$1.3bn
Value of Italian champions Milan, who have been purchased by investment group RedBird Capital Partners.

40%
World Cup prize money share that Canada's players are demanding from their football association after going on strike ahead of their friendly with Panama.

64
Years since Wales last qualified for a World Cup, a wait that was ended by their 1-0 play-off victory over Ukraine in Cardiff.

1
Days notice that Sao Tome e Principe were given ahead of their first 2023 AFCON qualifier after being reinstated in the competition following their disqualification.

£30
Price for all away tickets in next season's Premier League, after the clubs unanimously voted on introducing a price cap.

5
Substitutions that will be allowed in football, after lawmakers IFAB voted to make it a permanent feature of the game.

50
England goals for Harry Kane, who is now just three behind Wayne Rooney's all-time Three Lions scoring record.

4
South African clubs banned for life after fixing games to try to win the league. Shivulani Dangerous Tigers beat Kotoko Happy Boys 33-1 thanks to a swathe of own goals, before Matiyasi FC sealed a 59-1 win over Nsami Mighty Birds.

102
South Korea caps won by Tottenham's Son Heung-min after June's internationals.

6
Asian teams that will play at the World Cup for the first time in history.

26
FIFA have approved 26-man squads for Qatar 2022, allowing all 15 substitutes to also be named on the bench for each game.

16
Teams that will be in the Belgian top flight in 2023-24, after the league agreed to return to the pre-COVID format.

18
Months suspension handed out to Ivory Coast goalkeeper Sylvain Gbohouo by FIFA after he tested positive for a banned substance.

Suspended... Sylvain Gbohouo

£1.3bn
Reported cost of the renovation of the Nou Camp, which will see Barcelona temporarily play the 2023-24 season in the city's Olympic Stadium.

"Girondins de Bordeaux will appeal the DNCG's decision to relegate the club to National 1…the appeal will grant time to finalise new solutions to ensure Ligue 2 status"

A Bordeaux statement after the club was sent down to the third tier of French football

Alberth ELIS

(Bordeaux)

The Honduras forward may well feel like one of the unluckiest players around.

Nine goals in 20 games on loan at Bordeaux in a season spoilt by injury was an impressive return, yet was not enough to keep the club in Ligue 1. Indeed, the French side may not even play in Ligue 2 next season, following their demotion – pending appeal – to the third tier.

Bordeaux still had the funds to make Elis' loan from Boavista permanent, but he did not sign up to be a second-tier player, never mind a third-tier one.

A quick transfer is expected, with Leeds United reportedly leading the chase. Whoever wins the race, Elis will hope that his luck changes soon.

QR CORNER

Andorra sealed their UEFA Nations League win against Liechtenstein with this stunning halfway-line goal from Chus Rubio.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Adam HLOZEK
(Bayer Leverkusen)
Leverkusen paid over £11m to win the race for 19-year-old Hlozek's signature, who is regarded as the most talented Czech player since the country's golden generation of the early 2000s.

Isaac BABADI
(PSV)
The Netherlands Under-17 midfielder put his team through to the final of the U17 European Championship with an outrageous Panenka-style penalty in the semi-final shootout against Serbia.

Calvin RAMSEY
(Liverpool)
After getting nine assists in 33 games for Aberdeen last season, the 18-year-old right-back moved to Anfield for £4.2m. He'll be hoping to follow in the footsteps of his fellow Scot Andy Robertson.

Khvicha KVARATSKHELIA
(Napoli)
The 21-year-old left Rubin Kazan in March to join Dinamo Batumi, but eight goals in 11 games saw him get snapped up by Napoli. Already has eight goals in 16 appearances for Georgia.

Nathan COLLINS
(Burnley)
The list of Premier League clubs interested in the relegated centre-back grew even longer after his sensational solo goal v Ukraine while on international duty with the Republic of Ireland.

Maciej RYBUS
(Spartak Moscow)
Poland coach Czeslaw Michniewicz says Rybus will not be considered for World Cup selection after he joined Spartak. The Poles refused to play against Russia in March following the invasion of Ukraine.

World Soccer® Presents

MAKING OF MESSI

As Messi mania swept football, *World Soccer* was there every step of the way, and this special 100-page bookazine tracks Leo's amazing journey with club and country.

GREATEST RIVALRIES

From Rome to Cairo, Glasgow to Buenos Aires, Milan to Shanghai and Budapest to Rio de Janeiro, this edition showcases some of the biggest rivalries in football.

FACE TO FACE

This issue features a collection of interviews with footballing icons, including Maradona, Kaka, Zidane, Xavi, Ronaldo, Cruyff, Sacchi, Pele, Klinsmann, Shearer and Wenger.

HISTORY OF THE EUROS

Published specifically to coincide with the European Championship's 60th anniversary, *World Soccer* chronicles the history of the Euros, from 1960 through to 2020.

PEP TALK

The greatest manager of all time or a flawed genius? You decide after reading this special issue dedicated to Pep Guardiola and his incredible managerial achievements.

ICONIC TEAMS

We assess the players, managers, tactics and honours of some of the most famous football teams the world has ever seen, and explain what made them so iconic.

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World Soccer tracks the career of football phenomenon Cristiano Ronaldo; from teenage starlet to all-time top scorer in men's international football history.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

We celebrate the history of *World Soccer's* award winners, including the likes of Platini, Maradona, Gullit, Ronaldo, Van Basten, Zidane, Ronaldinho and Lewandowski.

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A nostalgic anthology of the Premier League from 1992 to 2007, including top players, great managers, iconic teams, memorable signings and scandalous stories.

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Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Qatar and the media

Getting ready ...a flag-raising ceremony in Doha after the last two World Cup finalists were confirmed

Down on the pitch the temperature gauge stood at 19.6°C; outside the stadium somewhere around 36°C. This was the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan, Qatar, late in the evening of the World Cup play-off showdown between Australia and Peru. Each step up towards the roof and the temperature rose with every footfall.

The evening temperature will be degrees lower come November and December during the extravaganza on which the last Emir set his sights 15 years ago and on whose ambition the current Emir will feast in a few short months.

Al Rayyan, on two successive evenings, enjoyed the last decisive World Cup confrontations before the finals' four-match kick-off on November 21. First Australia, with substitute goalkeeper Andrew Redmayne dancing to and fro along his goal-line, defeated Peru in a penalty shootout. Then Costa Rica, with a strike from Joel Campbell and reflexes of Keylor Navas, saw off New Zealand.

The ceremonial opening match of the finals between debutant hosts Qatar and Ecuador will not be the first match but the third. Preceding it will be the meeting of Group A rivals Senegal and Netherlands, followed by the Group B duel between England and Iran. After all, the Qataris have been turning logic on its head ever since winning hosting rights over the United States in a fifth round of voting by the now-defunct FIFA executive committee on December 2, 2010.

> The argument will run and run: should journalists report the world as they find it or the world they would prefer?

The ghosts of that decision will haunt the fringes of the finals. Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini have lately been in court in Switzerland in a squabble over how the presidents of FIFA and UEFA ran their kingdoms back then. Blatter still seethes over what he perceives as a personal betrayal by Platini, switching his vote to Qatar and scuppering Blatter's grand vision of a post-Cold War World Cup double: Russia in 2018, US in 2022.

Blatter dreamed of a crowning glory which would see FIFA, in his own image, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. No one talks of that now. Not even Gianni Infantino,

for all his assiduous image rebuilding.

Sport still possesses the magic saw that cuts through the divisive societal tree trunks of politics, religion, nationalism, etc. But even sport has its limitations. Infantino and Olympic president Thomas Bach have had to concede as much in the face of Russian military aggression and Chinese brutal treatment of its Uyghur Muslims.

These states are not alone in drawing foreign opprobrium; but they are the nation-state giants who used the games people play to enact what the western media, in particular, delights in describing as sportswashing.

When Qatar landed the World Cup in 2010, an achievement against the odds was considered an example of mere soft power: a state's ability to secure the sort of international visibility, status and prestige which would always remain beyond its military potential. But "soft power" is now considered a misleadingly benign term in the wake of the financial aggression to which sport has fallen prey.

Gulf petrodollars have turned Manchester City (Abu Dhabi) and Paris Saint-Germain (Qatar) into world club football's *nouveau riche*, as the old aristocracy struggles to stay within reach.

Elite football is not the sole target. Formula 1 motor racing has been bejewelled by the likes of Russia and Bahrain, while golf's comfortable closed-shop tours are under siege from a money-no-object explosion out of Saudi Arabia. But the Qatar World Cup will become the media's favourite target this autumn.

The Guardian has long promoted its own and Amnesty International's concerns about the deaths, plus working and contractual rights, of immigrant labourers from Southeast Asia. Norway's players wore T-shirts with the message: "Human rights – on and off the pitch" while warming up for a World Cup qualifying tie back in March 2021, and several clubs urged a boycott.

Norway coach Stale Solbakken said: "It's about putting pressure on FIFA to be even more direct, even firmer with the authorities in Qatar, to impose stricter requirements." Captain Martin Odegaard added: "A lot of players are interested in this, care about it and want to do something to try and contribute in a good way." Later, however, a special conference of the federation rejected a proposal for a boycott and the debate proved irrelevant when Norway failed to qualify.

International union and media pressure exerted on FIFA in one corner and Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy in the other has improved matters for World Cup-direct labourers. The *kafala* "ownership" system has been largely dismantled. What occurs once the circus has left town is, of course, another matter; Amnesty will continue to care and campaign but it will no longer have a World Cup hook on which to hang its banners.

Now, here is the twist.

All the broadcasters and high-circulation newspapers and magazines that have berated Qatar down the years, which have refused to accept Qatari-funded facility visits, which have relayed the human rights morality, will also pour their budgets into sending reporters, presenters, analysts, photographers, camera staff, technicians and engineers to spend a month in Qatar covering the World Cup.

If ethical barriers are malleable within sport, then they can be twisted every which way suits the headlines.

A handful of journalists have said they will decline to attend the World Cup because they have no truck with Qatar as a World Cup host. But very few. The argument will run and run: should journalists report the world as they find it or the world they would prefer? Even from the latter standpoint, attitudes and perspectives vary according to culture, politics, nationality and religion.

Abraham Lincoln rarely graces the pages of *World Soccer*. One of his most famous sayings (albeit disputed) was that: "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time but you cannot fool all the people all the time." So who is fooling who when it comes to soft power and its more aggressive cousin sportswashing?

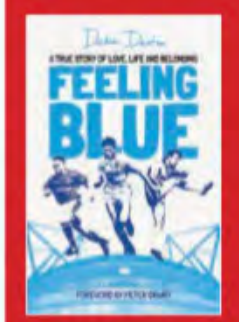
This is one debate that all the air-conditioning in Qatar's football world cannot cool. Until, that is, the football kicks off. At that point Qatar can breathe a sigh of impatient relief and bathe in a month's promotional sun.

Protests...Norway players wearing anti-Qatar T-shirts before a World Cup qualifier in March 2021

BOOKS THIS MONTH

IN THE HEAT OF THE MIDDAY SUN
By Steven Scragg (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

In the Heat of the Midday Sun is a love letter to the 1986 World Cup. With a devastating Mexico City earthquake just eight months before the big kick-off, it was a miracle that the Azteca was still able to be the venue of Maradona's greatest and most infamous hours. As well as Argentina's most gifted son, Mexico '86 was also blessed by the presence of Socrates, Platini, Francescoli, Butragueno, Belanov and Elkjaer to name but a few of the icons on display.



FEELING BLUE
By Richard Denton (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

This is a football fan's memoir like no other. Spanning more than 35 years and set across three continents, it is a true story that encompasses love, race and identity – all interweaved with the chaotic fall and rise of Manchester City. Dickie Denton's story climaxes in 2012, on a sultry May night in Singapore. *Feeling Blue* is a deeply personal story told with humour and honesty.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Southgate critics ignore reality

The pattern is familiar. An English player has a handful of good games. Fans and local journalists start talking about him. He keeps playing well. The national media begin to write profiles of him. His run of good form continues. The story has to move on a stage. So people start talking about him in terms of an international call-up. Why hasn't Gareth Southgate given him his chance yet?

And to an extent that is reasonable. No international manager can just stick with the same group of players come what may. He has to adjust according to form. And in the dark days of a decade or so ago, when England were desperately lacking in quality, picking purely on form made sense. But the problem is that a player in form now may not be in form in November, and Southgate's prime job is to prepare the team for the World Cup.

And in that, odd as it may seem to say in the aftermath of four UEFA Nations League games that felt like an unwelcome bolt-on to the season, the problem all international managers have is that there simply isn't enough international football. That means that games are over-scrutinised, sweeping conclusions being drawn from often as little as half a game, and managers have very limited time to try to impose anything like a sophisticated system.

One of the great truisms of football is that a national side is at its best when it is most like a club side. In terms of unity, team spirit, the sense of a common goal, that is almost certainly true. But no club manager, having perhaps put together three good performances then has to wait six weeks to play again, during which time he is urged to give a player who isn't in his squad a chance even though he already has three or four perfectly good players in that position. Perhaps the new player would make the squad stronger, but there is also a danger of disrupting the unit.

Facing criticism... Gareth Southgate

> It's a good group with potential rather than a great group, and in that regard back-to-back semi-finals – matching in three years what had been achieved in the previous 50 – represents a very laudable performance

It's become common to hear that a player "deserves his chance" with an international call-up. But playing for England, or any country, isn't a merit award. Southgate's job isn't to dish out caps like *Blue Peter* badges as a reward for good service; it's to pick a squad that will challenge for the World Cup. When Alf Ramsey called Jack Charlton to his England squad for the first time, he told him: "I have a pattern of play in mind. And I pick the best players to fit the pattern. I don't necessarily always pick the best players." Charlton was well aware of his shortcomings. He did not have the elegance of Bobby Moore, but that was the point. "You're a good tackler and you're good in the air, and I need those things," Ramsey went on. "And I know you don't trust Bobby Moore."

Southgate's pattern is now pretty well-established. He operates with three central defenders when he is concerned about controlling the ball,

Fans' favourite...Jack Grealish is a player that England fans have called for

and plays a 4-3-3 when he thinks England should dominate possession. The selection of a 4-2-3-1 against Germany broke that pattern and was perhaps an experiment to see whether two holding midfielders were sufficient to compensate for the loss of a central defender. The evidence of that first hour was that it is not – but then it's hardly a revelation that England lack the sort of midfielder whose passing ability allows them to control games.

Again, Southgate faces criticism for being too negative, for squandering this talented group of players. But while this group is clearly better than what went before, it has its limitations: Jordan Pickford never entirely inspires confidence, there is a lack of depth at centre-back, no great playmaking midfielder and no back-up for Harry Kane. There are a lot of extremely talented right-backs and a glut of wide-forwards, although none of them have consistently imposed themselves on international games. It's a good group with potential rather than a great group, and in that regard back-to-back semi-finals – matching in three years what had been achieved in the previous 50 – represents a very laudable performance.

And what do the critics think would happen if they fielded more attacking players? There'd simply be more of the sort of space Germany exploited anyway – as was the case in the 4-0 thrashing by Hungary, where Southgate opted for two attacking midfielders in the form of Jude Bellingham and Conor Gallagher. The nature of international football, as the last quarter-century has proved, is that the lack of time available for preparation means that complex attacking systems are all but impossible to instil, so safety-first has to prevail.

It may not be especially exciting and, after six years, there is a sense some are beginning to get bored of Southgate. But Ramsey too faced calls to be more entertaining. No coach is perfect, and Southgate has at times seemed slow to make changes during games, but much of the criticism of him seems to ignore the reality of international football.

OBITUARIES

Billy BINGHAM
(1931-2022)

Northern Irish legends... Bingham (R) with goalkeeper Pat Jennings

The 1980s were a golden era for Northern Irish football, thanks largely to the management of Bingham. As well as winning two British Home Championships – including the last-ever edition of the competition in 1984 – Bingham also guided the team to back-to-back World Cup finals appearances for the only time in its history. The 1982 tournament in Spain remains a particular high point, with Gerry Armstrong's famous goal against the hosts sending the team into the second round.

Bingham was already a Northern Irish hero for his playing exploits, having starred at the team's first World Cup appearance in 1958, before winning a then-record 56 caps. His club career included spells at Sunderland, Luton Town, Port Vale and Everton, with whom he won a league title, before a 33-year managerial career.

Haidar ABDUL-RAZZAQ
(1982-2022)
A member of the Iraq squad that famously won the 2007 Asian Cup.

Bernd BRANSCH
(1944-2022)
The sweeper was one of East Germany's most-capped players, and starred in both the bronze and gold medal-winning Olympic teams of 1972 and 1976, respectively, as well as at the 1974 World Cup.

Noel CAMPBELL
(1949-2022)
After joining Fortuna Cologne in 1971 and helping them win promotion two years later, Campbell became the first Irishman to play in the Bundesliga. A Republic of Ireland international of 11 caps, his final international game saw him sent off less than a minute after coming on as a substitute.

Craig FARRELL
(1982-2022)
The former Carlisle United, York City, Exeter City, Rushden & Diamonds and England U16 striker passed away at the age of just 39, having retired in 2015.

Colin GRAINGER
(1933-2022)
Nicknamed the "Singing Winger", Grainger combined a professional recording career with being an international footballer, going on a nationwide tour in 1957 just a year after scoring twice against Brazil on his England debut. His form saw him join Sunderland from Sheffield United, before an ankle injury ended his hopes of playing at the 1958 World Cup and hindered his top-flight career. After turning his attention back to music, he shared a bill with The Beatles in 1963.

Giuseppe BRIZI
(1942-2022)
Only one player has made more appearances for Fiorentina than Brizi, who was a key man in the club's second and last *Scudetto* back in 1968-69.

Davie WILSON
(1937-2022)
In an 11-year career at Rangers, the left-winger won four league titles and five Scottish Cups, while also helping the team reach the 1961 European Cup Winners' Cup final. Wilson also scored ten goals in 22 games for Scotland before ending his playing career at Dumbarton, whom he later guided to the Scottish top flight as manager.

Bobby HOPE
(1943-2022)
As well as playing 409 games for West Bromwich Albion between 1960 and 1972, the Scottish midfielder helped the side win two major trophies – the 1966 League Cup and 1968 FA Cup.

West Brom legend... Bobby Hope

"One thing is certain today – my story with Bayern is over. After everything that has happened in recent months …a transfer will be the best solution for both sides"

Robert Lewandowski confirms his intention to leave Bayern Munich

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

First managerial role…Carlos Tevez

EUROPE

In Spain, **GENNARO GATTUSO** took charge of Valencia. In Germany, Borussia Monchengladbach appointed **DANIEL FARKE**, and **SANDRO SCHWARZ** took over the reins at Hertha Berlin.

Former Liverpool and Netherlands striker **DIRK KUYT** took his first steps in management by taking charge of ADO Den Haag, while **MIROSLAV KLOSE** was appointed by Austrian side Rheindorf Altach. Basle legend **ALEXANDER FREI** returned to the Swiss club as manager.

In Belgium, **CARL HOEFKENS** took the Club Brugge job and **MARK VAN BOMMEL** was installed at Antwerp, while **RONNY DEILA** left New York City FC for Standard Liege. Meanwhile, second-tier side Lommel SK hired ex-Arsenal centre-back **STEVE BOULD**.

In Turkey, former Benfica and Flamengo boss **JORGE JESUS** took charge of Fenerbahce, while **ANDREA PIRLO** joined Fatih Karagumruk.

In the English Championship, Blackburn Rovers appointed former Milan and Denmark striker **JON DAHL TOMASSON** as their new manager, ex-Manchester City captain **VINCENT KOMPANY** took charge of Burnley, and **MICHAEL APPLETON** returned to former club Blackpool. In League One, **MICHAEL DUFF** left Cheltenham Town for Barnsley. In Scotland, **JACK ROSS** was appointed Dundee United's new manager after **TAM COURTS** left for Budapest Honved in Hungary.

SOUTH AMERICA

Shortly after announcing his retirement from playing, **CARLOS TEVEZ** was handed his first managerial role at Argentine side Rosario Central.

Former Uruguay defender **DIEGO GODIN** left Atletico Mineiro, after just six months with the Brazilian club, to join Velez Sarsfield in Argentina.

SUMMER 2022 EUROPE'S LATEST MAJOR TRANSFERS

Wonderkid… Aurelien Tchouameni

Bayern's boy… Ryan Gravenberch

Erling Haaland replacement… Karim Adeyemi

£68.3m	**Aurelien Tchouameni**	*Monaco to Real Madrid*
£54m	**Erling Haaland**	*Dortmund to Manchester City*
£36m	**Federico Chiesa**	*Fiorentina to Juventus*
£34.2m	**Nuno Mendes**	*Sporting to Paris Saint-Germain*
£34.2m	**Fabio Vieira**	*Porto to Arsenal*
£30m	**Nayef Aguerd**	*Rennes to West Ham United*
£30m	**Yves Bissouma**	*Brighton to Tottenham*
£27m	**Karim Adeyemi**	*RB Salzburg to Dortmund*
£22.2m	**Brenden Aaronson**	*RB Salzburg to Leeds*
£21.24m	**Joaquin Correa**	*Lazio to Internazionale*
£18m	**Merih Demiral**	*Juventus to Atalanta*
£18m	**Nico Schlotterbeck**	*Freiburg to Dortmund*
£16.65m	**Ryan Gravenberch**	*Ajax to Bayern Munich*
£15m	**Matt Targett**	*Aston Villa to Newcastle*
£13.5m	**Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa**	*Fulham to Napoli*
£12.6m	**Gavin Bazunu**	*Man City to Southampton*
£10.8m	**Xaver Schlager**	*Wolfsburg to RB Leipzig*
£10.8m	**Mohamed-Ali Cho**	*Angers to Real Sociedad*
£10.8m	**Jens Petter Hauge**	*Milan to Eintracht Frankfurt*
£10.8m	**Pau Lopez**	*Roma to Marseille*
£10.4m	**Marc Roca**	*Bayern Munich to Leeds*
£10m	**Rasmus Kristensen**	*RB Salzburg to Leeds*
£9.9m	**Mathias Olivera**	*Getafe to Napoli*
£9.9m	**Matteo Guendouzi**	*Arsenal to Marseille*
£9.45m	**Giovanni Simeone**	*Cagliari to Hellas Verona*
£9m	**Willian Jose**	*Real Sociedad to Real Betis*
£9m	**Ruben Vinagre**	*Wolves to Sporting*
£9m	**Jakub Kaminski**	*Lech Poznan to Wolfsburg*
£8.6m	**Armel Bella-Kotchap**	*Bochum to Southampton*
£8.55m	**Jeremiah St Juste**	*Mainz to Sporting*
£8.18m	**Adam Buksa**	*New England to Lens*
£7.2m	**Alexander Bah**	*Slavia Prague to Benfica*
£6.3m	**Cameron Carter-Vickers**	*Tottenham to Celtic*
£5.8m	**Matt Turner**	*New England to Arsenal*
£4.5m	**Salih Ozcan**	*Cologne to Dortmund*
£3.6m	**Mario Gotze**	*PSV to Eintracht Frankfurt*

FREE TRANSFERS

Alexandre Lacazette
Arsenal to Lyon
Jonjoe Kenny
Everton to Hertha Berlin
Nemanja Matic
Manchester United to Roma
Romain Saiss *Wolves to Besiktas*
Ivan Perisic
Internazionale to Tottenham
Antonio Rudiger
Chelsea to Real Madrid
Boubacar Kamara
Marseille to Aston Villa
Niklas Stark
Hertha Berlin to Werder Bremen
Danilo *Ajax to Feyenoord*
Noussair Mazraoui
Ajax to Bayern Munich
Niklas Sule
Bayern Munich to Dortmund
Matthias Ginter
B. Monchengladbach to Freiburg
Fraser Forster
Southampton to Tottenham
Walter Benitez *Nice to PSV*
Sam Johnstone
West Brom to Crystal Palace
Ryan Fredericks
West Ham to Bournemouth

LOANS

Romelu Lukaku
Chelsea to Internazionale
Mario Vrancic
Stoke City to Rijeka

"His dream was to play at Real Madrid ...he must have changed his dream"

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez discusses Kylian Mbappe's failed move to Spain

Farewell...the Champions League final was Mane's last game for Liverpool

Nunez replaces Mane at Anfield

Following the arrival of Luis Diaz in January, Liverpool bolstered their attacking ranks with another recruit from the Portuguese top flight in the shape of Benfica's Uruguayan striker **DARWIN NUNEZ** for £64 million plus add-ons.

The 23-year-old will replace **SADIO MANE**, who agreed a £27.4m move to German champions Bayern Munich – a figure that could rise to £35.1m depending on appearances and achievements.

The Senegal forward could fill Robert Lewandowski's goalscoring boots, with the Poland striker reportedly angling for a move to Barcelona.

Flamengo signed Brazil winger **EVERTON** from Benfica for a fee of £12.15m, and also hired **DORIVAL JUNIOR** to replace former Portugal midfielder **PAULO SOUSA** as manager.

CONCACAF

Columbus Crew paid Watford a club record $10m for Colombian striker **CUCHO HERNANDEZ**, while **GIORGIO CHIELLINI**, **HECTOR HERRERA** and **LORENZO INSIGNE** all completed free transfers to Los Angeles FC, Houston Dynamo and Toronto FC respectively. **DOUGLAS COSTA** joined LA Galaxy on a six-month loan from Brazilian Serie B side Gremio.

ASIA

Xavi's former Qatari club Al-Sadd appointed Pep Guardiola's assistant **JUANMA LILLO** as manager.

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Leaving Zenit... Artem Dzyuba

EUROPE

The exodus out of Ukrainian giants Shakhtar Donetsk continued, with wingers **DAVID NERES** and **FERNANDO** joining Benfica and Red Bull Salzburg respectively, and midfielder **MARCOS ANTONIO** moving to Italians Lazio.

Ex-Inter, Roma, Manchester City and Serbia defender **ALEKSANDAR KOLAROV** announced his retirement.

ARTEM DZYUBA departed Zenit Saint Petersburg after seven years at the club and scoring over 100 goals.

RYAN GIGGS resigned as Wales manager having stepped away from the role in November 2020.

ALAN PARDEW quit his role as CSKA Sofia coach, blaming the racist behaviour of some of the club's fans.

AFRICA

Egypt sacked coach **EHAB GALAL** after only two months in charge.

SOUTH AMERICA

Several South American-based stars left for European clubs. Uruguay forward **AGUSTIN ALVAREZ** moved to Sassuolo from Penarol, **LUIZ HENRIQUE** joined Real Betis from Fluminense, Colombian midfielder **JORGE CARRASCAL** left River Plate for CSKA Moscow, and Brighton paid Libertad £10.44m for Paraguayan forward **JULIO ENCISO**.

FREE AGENTS

At the time of writing, the following players were free agents after reaching the end of their contracts:

Dani Alves *(Barcelona)*
Serge Aurier *(Villarreal)*
Andrea Belotti *(Torino)*
Federico Bernardeschi *(Juventus)*
Edinson Cavani *(Manchester United)*
Andreas Christensen *(Chelsea)*
Fabian Delph *(Everton)*
Ousmane Dembele *(Barcelona)*
Jason Denayer *(Lyon)*
Angel Di Maria *(Paris Saint-Germain)*
Paulo Dybala *(Juventus)*
Christian Eriksen *(Brentford)*
Cesc Fabregas *(Monaco)*
Luiz Felipe *(Lazio)*
Isco *(Real Madrid)*
Adnan Januzaj *(Real Sociedad)*
Loris Karius *(Liverpool)*
Franck Kessie *(Milan)*
Jesse Lingard *(Manchester United)*
Marcelo *(Real Madrid)*
Juan Mata *(Manchester United)*
Ben Mee *(Burnley)*
Henrikh Mkhitaryan *(Roma)*
Andre Onana *(Ajax)*
Divock Origi *(Liverpool)*
David Ospina *(Napoli)*
Paul Pogba *(Manchester United)*
Alessio Romagnoli *(Milan)*
Thomas Strakosha *(Lazio)*
Luis Suarez *(Atletico Madrid)*
James Tarkowski *(Burnley)*
Corentin Tolisso *(Bayern Munich)*
Cenk Tosun *(Everton)*
Sime Vrsaljko *(Atletico Madrid)*

PRE-SEASON TOURS

Who's playing where and when

6 ENGLAND

Number of Spanish sides that will be in England for pre-season friendlies. Arsenal will host Sevilla in the annual Emirates Cup in a repeat of the 2017 clash, while Athletic Bilbao, Real Sociedad, Real Betis, Villarreal and Rayo Vallecano are also in the country to face Premier League sides Newcastle United, Bournemouth, Brentford, Southampton and Manchester United respectively.

4 PORTUGAL

The Eusebio Cup, which was first played in 2008, will be renewed for the first time in four years when Newcastle United visit the Estadio da Luz to take on Benfica.

15 USA

Fixtures featuring major European clubs in the United States this summer. As usual, Premier League sides are flocking across the Atlantic to take part in friendlies against both MLS and European clubs: Arsenal, for example, will take on Everton, Chelsea and Orlando City, while Manchester City are also stateside to face Mexican side America and Bayern Munich. Bayern aren't the only European giants to join the English cohort, with Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus all facing off against each other. The game between Madrid and Barca in Las Vegas will be the first overseas *Clasico* since their 2017 meeting in Florida.

56 SPAIN

Editions of the Joan Gamper Trophy to have been played so far, Barcelona's traditional pre-season tournament, which renews again for the 57th occasion as Europa Conference League winners Roma head to the Nou Camp. Elsewhere, La Nucia in Alicante will host three teams – Wolverhampton Wanderers, Besiktas and Alaves – as they meet in Southern Spain.

22,468 NORWAY

Air miles that Manchester United will rack up on their pre-season world tour, which ends in Scandinavia. Starting with a grudge match against Liverpool in Bangkok, they then have three games in Australia before heading to Oslo to face Atletico Madrid on July 30.

2 SOUTH KOREA

Games that Tottenham Hotspur will play in Son Heung-min's home country. The north London giants will hope to enhance their reputation in the Southeast Asian country even further with a tour that begins with a clash against a K-League XI, before facing Sevilla at the Suwon World Cup Stadium.

2 GERMANY

Games that Premier League club Brentford will play while on a training camp in Germany this summer, first visiting Stuttgart and then Wolfsburg. Milan and Real Sociedad will also spend some time in Germany, facing Cologne and Borussia Monchengladbach respectively.

1 ISRAEL

Jose Mourinho will face his old club Tottenham Hotspur for the first time since leaving the club in 2021 when they meet his Roma side in the I-Tech Cup in Haifa.

2 THAILAND

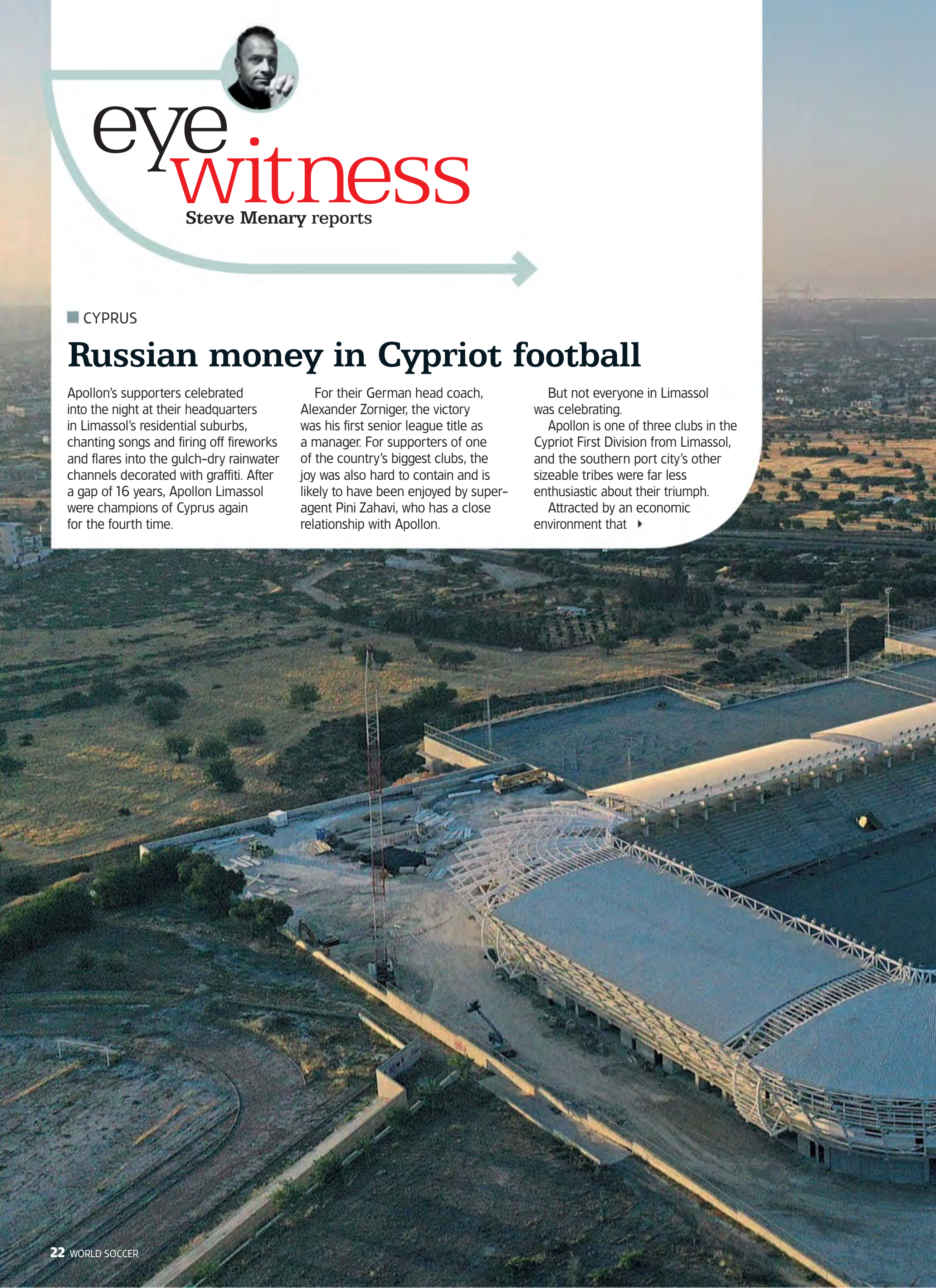
Premier League opponents that Liverpool will face on their pre-season tour of Thailand, taking on Manchester United in a clash that has been titled "The Match" before facing Crystal Palace a few days later. The Reds return to the Asian country after last visiting in 2015.

3 JAPAN

Number of games that Paris Saint-Germain will take part in on their pre-season tour of Japan. The French champions will face Kawasaki Frontale, Urawa Red Diamonds and Gamba Osaka in Tokyo, Saitama and Suita respectively, following successful visits to Singapore and China in recent years.

2 AUSTRALIA

Premier League teams that will compete in the Queensland Champions Cup, as Leeds United and Aston Villa take on A-League side Brisbane Roar for the trophy. Crystal Palace and Manchester United will also be visiting Australia, meeting at the near-100,000 capacity Melbourne Cricket Ground.



eyewitness

Steve Menary reports

CYPRUS

Russian money in Cypriot football

Apollon's supporters celebrated into the night at their headquarters in Limassol's residential suburbs, chanting songs and firing off fireworks and flares into the gulch-dry rainwater channels decorated with graffiti. After a gap of 16 years, Apollon Limassol were champions of Cyprus again for the fourth time.

For their German head coach, Alexander Zorniger, the victory was his first senior league title as a manager. For supporters of one of the country's biggest clubs, the joy was also hard to contain and is likely to have been enjoyed by super-agent Pini Zahavi, who has a close relationship with Apollon.

But not everyone in Limassol was celebrating.

Apollon is one of three clubs in the Cypriot First Division from Limassol, and the southern port city's other sizeable tribes were far less enthusiastic about their triumph.

Attracted by an economic environment that ▸

Under construction... the new Limassol Arena will be shared by the city's three clubs

controversially used to provide passports for anyone who invested €2 million or more – often through developing fancy flats around Limassol – and an often clandestine way of doing business, Cyprus is currently home to thousands of Russians.

The guttural sounds of Russian voices are rarely far away when walking around Limassol's marina or the old town. Home to an estimated 40,000 Russians, the southern port city is known to Cypriots as "Limassol-grad".

Many of the Russian residents are not supporters of Vladimir Putin's regime or his invasion of Ukraine and some demonstrated against the war, although a counter rally also supported the brutal incursion.

There is hardly a country in Europe – and certainly not one outside of the old Soviet Union – that has seen such an infiltration of Russian influence, and that is extending increasingly into football. Just not on the pitch.

Teenage forward Magomedkhabib Abdusalamov at Pafos was the only Russian playing in the Cypriot First Division in 2021-22, but two of the 12 top-flight clubs are Russian-owned. That number will increase next season, when the league expands to 14 teams.

Vladimir Federov owns Apollon's Limassol rivals Aris, where his low-profile tenure is widely seen as good for a club that finished a creditable fourth in 2021-22. Just 70 kilometres down the southern coast from Limassol, the Russian owners at Pafos are far more outspoken and controversial.

When Russian billionaire Sergey Lomakin, who co-founded Russian discount retailer Fix Price in 2007 and had a net worth of $3.1 billion in 2021 (according to *Forbes*), bought into Pafos he entertained local journalists with tales of how the club would be in Europe within three years.

Title winners... Apollon players parade through the city

Lomakin and his Russian partner Roman Dubov have made Pafos the centrepiece of their own multi-club ownership (MCO) operation alongside Latvian champions Riga FC and Russian third-tier side Rodina, but success in Cyprus has so far proven elusive.

Pafos have gone through managers at an alarming rate and remain one of the biggest spenders in Cypriot football, running up reported losses of €5.5m in 2020 alone. The club have signed swathes of overseas players, and former Real Madrid player Michel Salgado is head of football at Total Sports Investments (TSI), which controls Dubov's MCO stakes.

In 2021-22, Pafos finished sixth – up one place from the previous season – but a potential return on such sizeable investment through a place in UEFA competition remains tantalisingly out of reach.

Each year, the clubs in TSI's MCO group all convene in Cyprus in the international break to contest a friendly cup competition sponsored by Pafos backers, Korantina Homes. In November 2021 Brentford's B-team, a side from the Spanish players' union AFE and Federov's Aris also took part.

Next season, more clubs with Russian involvement will join Pafos and Aris in the top flight, but the depth of that involvement remains unclear.

Akritas Chlorakas, who secured promotion after finishing in third in 2021-22, were widely viewed as a satellite club of Pafos and that would have been a problem with both clubs due to be in the same league in 2022-23.

The problem appears to have been circumnavigated by the arrival in May 2022 of Liutauras Varanavicius, the ex-president of the Lithuanian football association, as an "investor" at Akritas.

The sight of Varanavicius in photos with Russian-Lithuanian businessman Vladimir Romanov has unsettled some Cypriot football supporters.

"Limassol-grad" ...a sign in Russian in the Cypriot city

He was the majority shareholder at a string of clubs including Lithuanian team FBK Kaunas, Partizan Minsk of Belarus and Scottish Premiership side Hearts, who collapsed into insolvency in 2013.

In addition to backing Akritas, Varanavicius' business ConnectPay has become the main sponsor at Pafos. The financial situation at Akritas is still unfolding but there will definitely be one more club in the Cypriot top flight with overt Russian backing.

After relegation in 2020-21, Karmiotissa Polemidion bounced back by winning the second division title. The club has previously been fined by the Cyprus FA for match-fixing and their return was not universally popular, but controversial owner Demetris Vrachimis has sold out to Dmitriy Punin.

The little-known Russian has promised to produce a budget of €5-7m, which would match giants like Nicosia pair Omonia and APOEL, and Apollon, although that type of spending has yet to produce success at Pafos.

This type of largesse raises eyebrows in Cyprus, but since the island's economy tanked in 2012-13, locals have long grown to tolerate the presence of Russians, who have brought investment in so many areas of life on the island.

Russian involvement in Cypriot football extends well beyond owning local clubs. The Football National League (FNL) Cup was staged in Cyprus during the Russian off-season from 2012 and involved clubs such as Ural Yekaterinburg – winners in the first two seasons – and Khimki, who won in 2020.

Cyprus has also been a popular destination for Russian clubs attending training camps. One of the key figures involved in bringing Russian clubs to the island was Anton Farber, a Russian match agent who lived mainly in Monaco and Spain.

Over the years, Russian clubs such as Kuban, Ufa, Ural Yekaterinburg, Tosno, Enisey and Orenburg have all visited Cyprus, but a few years ago matches began to attract suspicion.

Cypriot has a long history of problems with match-fixing involving smaller local clubs but, between 2016 and 2018, 16 friendlies played in Cyprus and involving Russian clubs were rated as suspicious according to an Erasmus research project published at the end of last year.

Suspicious friendlies are not the only dubious football-related business involving Russians in Cyprus. The island is also home to Russian betting companies that are using football to expand, including 1xBet.

The controversial betting operator sponsored English Premier League clubs Chelsea, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur until a 2019 *Sunday Times* investigation alleging promoting a "pornhub casino" that used topless croupiers online to attract bettors.

1xBet was subsequently banned from operating in both the UK and Russia, so the four Russians behind the business all then moved to Cyprus, where 1xBet has registered some subsidiaries.

A secretive business culture has led to Cyprus becoming a hub for these types of business practices, which infiltrated football at so many levels.

That involvement appeared to be weakening. The staging of the FNL Cup ended with the start of COVID-19 and fewer Russian clubs had been visiting Cyprus in the off-season well before the pandemic anyway, and there are signs that a new relationship with Russia may emerge.

Cyprus has backed the international sanctions against Russia, which was a major political decision. In 2020, more than €100bn in investments into the island came from Russia according to *Politico*. That is roughly a quarter of all foreign investments coming into Cyprus.

The biggest hits will come to the Cypriot banking sector, while many of the large residential buildings developed by Russians in return for passports that are up for sale are likely to remain unsold, but Punin's arrival suggests football is unaffected.

Cypriot clubs had a good 2021-22 campaign in European competition and two clubs made the group stage of UEFA's Europa Conference League.

"The Cyprus Championship is in 15th place in Europe [according to UEFA's coefficient], it has great potential," said Varanavicius after his arrival at Akritas was unveiled.

Cyprus is attracting other investors, with second-tier clubs that only have a few hundred supporters also attracting attention from investors, but not the sort that football fans on the island would necessarily want. Players from second-tier side, Alki Oroklini, for example – a small village outside Larnaca with a population of just over 6,000 – reported non-payment of wages to the Pancyprian Footballers Association at the end of last season.

With the top clubs achieving in Europe, the game in Cyprus is attracting attention and investment but not all of that will necessarily be what Cypriots want.

Home to an estimated 40,000 Russians, the southern port city is known to Cypriots as "Limassol-grad"

A city divided... some anti AEL Limassol graffiti in the city

Pafos director...Michel Salgado

eyewitness

Joe Phelan reports

BRAZIL

No more yo-yos

Brazil's reputation as a footballing powerhouse is built on a collection of improbable success stories. Some of the game's greatest talents – Pele, Romario, Garrincha, Socrates, Ronaldo and Ronaldinho, to name just a few – honed their skills barefoot on the street or on wastelands of dirt and stone, with access to grass pitches severely limited.

Many *Selecao* superstars grew up in abject poverty. Rivaldo, for example, spent his young years in Encruzilhada, a violent and run-down favela in the city of Recife. As a child he was so malnourished that he lost several teeth and developed bowed legs. His fellow 2002 World Cup winner, Cafu, was raised in Jardim Irene, one of the poorest parts of Sao Paulo, as was Gabriel Jesus.

In a country still divided by extreme inequality and staggering wealth gaps, such rags-to-riches stories are common, particularly in football. Time and again, the sport has proven to not only be a source of joy and solace to Brazilians, but also a way out of hardship.

Almost every on-pitch Brazilian success, it seems, is the culmination of an underdog's determination to triumph; it is a country infused with footballing fervour and an insatiable desire to defy the odds. And, if there is a club that embodies this mentality, it is Avai FC.

Established in 1923 in the southern Brazilian city of Florianopolis, Avai – nicknamed The Lion of the Island – is a club that has carved out a reputation for striving, battling and struggling to reach the heights of not only the country's

more recognised sides, but also bitter local rivals Figueirense.

Throughout 99 years of existence, Avai have experienced more lows than highs, but now the club is on the verge of establishing themselves as a top-tier regular, and consigning to the past their long-time status as a yo-yo club.

Promotion...Avai players celebrate scoring during their promotion campaign
Credit: Avai FC

Avai, as with most Brazilian clubs, emerged from humble beginnings. The team was created by Amadeu Horn, a successful merchant who resided on the island Florianopolis – which makes up 90 per cent of the city's territory – who traded mainly in medicines. On a whim, he bought a batch of rudimentary football shirts, handed them out to boys in the city for no reason other than to give them a leisurely focus, and the team was born.

From 1923 until 1926 Horn acted as the club's first president, using his house as the club's headquarters. He named the club Avai in honour of 1868's Battle of Avay, a decisive moment in the Paraguayan War that, ultimately, saw the alliance of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay claim victory over – and economically cripple – neighbouring Paraguay.

On the pitch, Avai saw regional success almost immediately. In 1924, they won the inaugural Santa Catarina State Championship, conquering Trabalhista in the final. This victory handed Avai the first of four state championship titles in the space of five years. This was, however,

We are going up... Avai fans celebrate under a massive flag following their promotion to Serie A
Credit: Samuel Pereira

their peak purple patch, and as good as things would get for quite some time.

Regional state tournaments, such as the Santa Catarina State Championship, are incredibly important in Brazilian football, especially for small teams such as Avai. Most sides in Brazil, especially those outside of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, never get close to capturing national titles or the Brazilian Cup, and so regional competitions present the only feasible way to lift a trophy.

Indeed, since the national league was introduced in 1959, only 17 different teams have been crowned champions. Since then, Rio and Sao Paulo-based clubs have claimed two thirds of the available league titles between them. The power in Brazilian football very much sits in the hands of the established sides, and clubs like Avai do not belong to that crowd.

Santa Catarina is, in Brazilian terms, small. Of the 26 states in the country, it is the seventh-smallest, and doesn't contain a great number of professional football clubs. As a result, and because the regional championship is so valued in this part of the country, Avai has developed a deep, passionate

Bridging the gap... the bridge between Avai and city arch rivals Figueirense

Grudge match... Avai players line up ahead of a clash with rivals Figueirense
Credit: Avai FC

rivalry with Figueirense, a side based just ten miles away.

Avai play on the island of Florianopolis, while Figueirense's stadium is on the Brazilian mainland, and this geographical divide has undoubtedly added an element of tribalism to the decades-long feud.

In terms of on-pitch success, Figueirense have been the region's dominant force in recent history. Though Avai and Figueirense have both won 18 regional titles – making them the two most successful teams in the history of the Santa Catarina State Championship – half of Avai's victories came prior to 1946. Figueirense, on the other hand, have won half of their titles since 1999.

Additionally, Figueirense, in the early 2000s, established themselves as one of the country's most exciting sides. After gaining promotion to Serie A – Brazil's top division – for the 2002 season, they spent eight consecutive years in the top flight, finishing as high as seventh in 2006. This was unprecedented for a team from Santa Catarina, and firmly cemented them as the region's most revered team.

During the same period, Avai were floundering in the lower divisions. After struggling in Serie C for much of the '90s, Avai's blue and white shirt became a semi-permanent feature of Serie B's mid-table. The club was, to a large extent, lacking in ambition and drive, and with each passing year became increasingly overshadowed by their noisy, more prosperous neighbours.

Taking on the big boys...Avai defender Raniele challenges Atletico Mineiro's Hulk in Serie A

This season, Avai are back in Serie A and optimism around the club has never been higher. There is a strong feeling that this time the season's outcome will be different

Now though, the tide has turned in Santa Catarina. Figueirense were relegated from the top division in 2008 and, although they have been promoted again a couple of times since, they have now plummeted down the divisions. Following two dismal seasons in Serie B, in which they finished 15th and 16th, Figueirense were relegated to Serie C in 2020, where they remain.

Avai, meanwhile, have gone from strength to strength. Promotions to Serie A in both 2017 and 2019 may have only lasted one year, but they gave the fans and owners a taste of the high life: Serie A was where they belonged.

This season, Avai are back in Serie A and optimism around the club has never been higher. There is a strong feeling that this time the season's outcome will be different. The owners are adamant the appropriate foundations are now in place; the managerial team certain that the team has never been more unified; and, perhaps most importantly, the supporters truly believe they could soon witness achievements the likes of which no Avai fan throughout the club's 99-year existence has experienced.

Now it is Figueirense's turn to live in their local rivals' shadow, with Avai on the cusp of doing something that has been beyond any side from Santa Catarina: becoming a mainstay in the country's top division. Doing so will certainly be a challenge, and there will be bad times as well as good in the near future, but there is no reason to doubt that, as Avai close in on their 100th birthday, the very best is yet to come.

Well supported... fans inside Avai's Ressacada stadium
Credit: Avai FC

eye witness

Lukas Vrablik reports

SLOVAKIA

Highs and lows for Spartak Trnava

It all ended in tears. A few days after winning a trophy, Martin Skrtel, the former Liverpool centre-back, suddenly announced a press conference. There, he confirmed the rumours: one of Slovakian football's all-time greats would be ending his football career.

The 37-year-old Skrtel returned to Slovakia at the start of last season after 17 years abroad. Although he became a professional at Trencin, he always expressed his dream to play for Spartak Trnava, the team he supported as a boy and historically one of Slovakia's two biggest clubs.

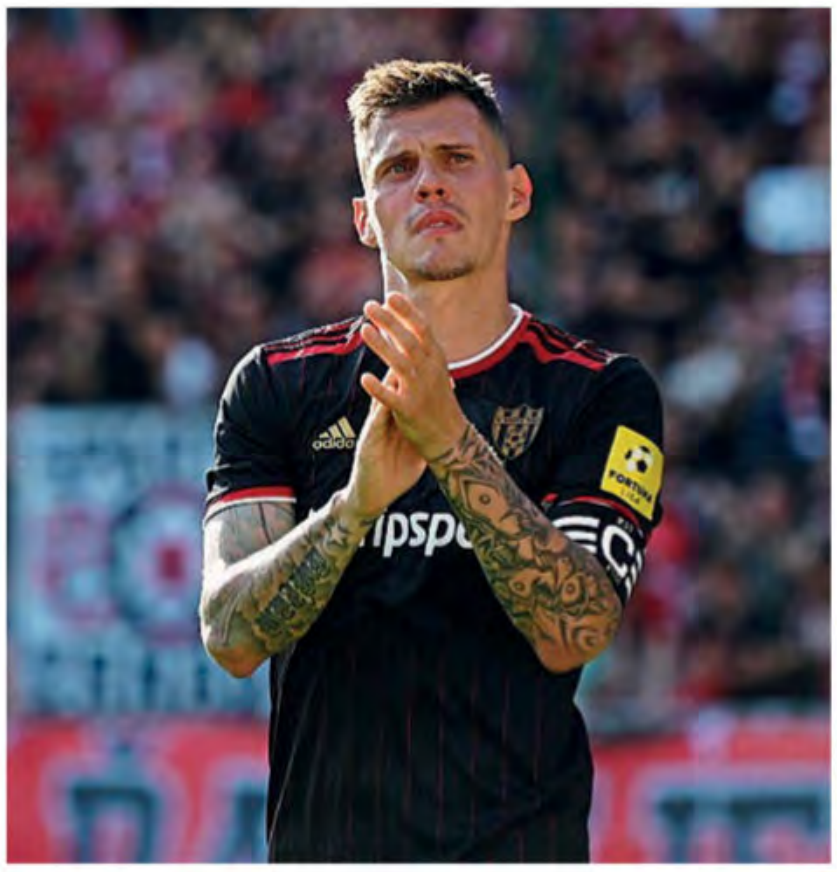
His dream came true in the summer of 2021, after a spell in Turkey at Istanbul Basaksehir came to an end. Skrtel, with 104 caps for Slovakia and participations at two major tournaments, immediately became the biggest star of the Slovak Fortuna Liga. With Skrtel at the heart of the defence, Spartak Trnava looked like title challengers.

"I felt the players' desire to achieve something," Michal Gasparik, Spartak Trnava's coach, tells *World Soccer*. "A lot of coaches changed and we had to convince the players they could achieve more."

Trnava, a town of 63,000 in the west of the country, last won the league in 2018, when they became champions for the first time since 1973. That latter title was the conclusion of a dominant era for the club, as they won the Czechoslovak league five times in six seasons and reached the European Cup semi-final in 1969, where they were defeated by Johan Cruyff's Ajax.

This was a real golden age for Trnava, with most of the team born in or nearby the town, and legendary players like Ladislav Kuna, Karol Dobias and Jozef Adamec in the squad.

Every Spartak Trnava side since have lived in the shadow of that legendary team. Realistically, those European heights are now out of reach, but a club with arguably the strongest and most passionate fan base in the country have undoubtedly underperformed domestically. It took the arrival of young Serbian-born English coach Nestor El Maestro to end the 45-year wait for a title – Trnava's first since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.



Farewell...Martin Skrtel says goodbye to the Trnava fans

After an impressive start to the 2021-22 campaign, it looked as though Trnava could challenge Slovan Bratislava for the title. The rivalry between the two sides is the biggest in Slovakia, but in recent years Trnava have been unable to compete with the financially stronger Slovan, who have now won the last four league titles in a row.

There are some differences between these clubs: Slovan, in their attempt to become successful in Europe, import a lot of players from abroad, while Trnava have traditionally aimed to build the squad around homegrown, local players. In order to aid that process, they appointed Gasparik as their new head coach in January 2021 after five years working as a youth coach at the club.

The 40-year-old was himself a graduate of his hometown club's academy, playing over 150 league games in three different spells at Trnava. In total, Gasparik says he has spent around 25 years at the club: "I built a close relationship, different to other clubs I played in. In the end, I became their head coach. It's very different to work at home, where everybody knows me."

After taking charge of the team,

Line-up...Spartak Trnava players

Gasparik wanted to strengthen the links to the local community. That's why he pushed for captain Martin Mikovic – born in Trnava – to stay, and build the core around him and other locals, such as Roman Prochazka, and young talents like Gergely Tumma and Sebastian Kosa.

After guiding the side to the Europa Conference League, Gasparik's first full season in charge started well and, after ten games, they faced Slovan with the two sides level on points at the top of the table.

It was a game that was described as one of the biggest in the history of the Slovak league – yet it didn't even last a quarter of an hour.

After 15 minutes, crowd trouble spilled over onto the pitch, as hooligans of both teams ran through barriers and started fighting on the pitch. The game was suspended and never continued. Trnava, as hosts, were punished and Slovan were handed a 3-0 victory.

A couple of months later, key men Filip Twardzik and Cabral departed, and Trnava's title challenge collapsed.

The opportunity for redemption came at the end of the season, though, as the two teams met in the final of the Slovak Cup. A few days before the game, it still wasn't clear if it would go ahead, and if so, where. Last minute, the Slovak Football Association (SFZ) chose the National Football Stadium as the venue.

It wasn't a popular decision. Trnava were opposed to the idea of playing at Slovan's home ground, while the local municipality didn't want to host the derby after the fan violence from just a few months earlier.

It was a game that was described as one of the biggest in the history of the Slovak league – yet it didn't even last a quarter of an hour

In the end, the game went ahead. Despite playing on enemy soil, Trnava came from 1-0 down to win 2-1 in extra-time. More importantly, there was no violence and supporters even found a common ground – however, only in vulgar chanting directed against the Slovak FA.

Passionate fans... Trnava are one of the best-supported clubs in Slovakia

Skrtel, who wore the captain's armband for his final game, fulfilled his dream by lifting silverware with his boyhood club – the perfect way to bow out. Ideally he'd have continued, but his body would not allow it. In a press conference, he explained that back problems cause him pain even while walking. It simply wasn't worth it anymore.

"I don't remember a day without the pain," Skrtel said. "If it was only in the games or training, you could accept it somehow. However, over the last months I had to play with pills and injections. My personal life didn't exist, I had a problem to go with my son for a 100-metre walk. If we did this press conference standing, I wouldn't manage to do it."

Skrtel had an immense impact on both Trnava and the rest of the league, to the extent that many people travelled from around the country just to watch him play live.

"In the dressing room, it was visible

ABOVE: Winners... Trnava players run to celebrate with their fans after winning the cup

LEFT: Trophy lift... Skrtel raises the 2021-22 Slovak Cup with his team-mates

Picture credits: Lucas Grinaj, fcspartaktrnava.com

Derby violence... fans of Trnava and Slovan Bratislava fight on the pitch

> In Slovakia, the public interest in the local league is small, with some games' attendances in the hundreds. Trnava are one of the very few clubs left with a proper supporters' base and a fan culture

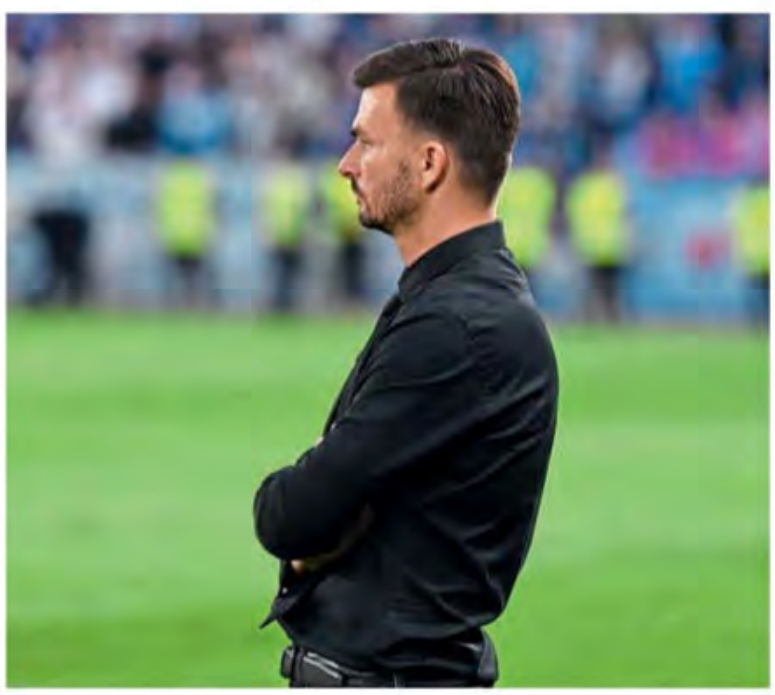
the players had a big respect for Skrtel, as he's a Slovak football icon," Gasparik explains. "Since the start, he acted like he was just one of us. Young players have grown up while playing with him. It's a pity it lasted only one year, because we created a centre-back partnership with 18-year-old Kosa, who had Skrtel as his mentor."

Gasparik thinks the recent cup success could be also seen in a wider perspective. "There are a few guys from Trnava also in the coaching staff, not only in the squad," he says. "Then, you can feel it on the pitch, too. Even if Slovan might have had a higher quality, we showed some things typical for Trnava: a fighting spirit, bigger emotions. Sometimes, that means more than a football art. That's why we might have won the trophy, too, and we did it at our rival's pitch."

In Slovakia, the public interest in the local league is small, with some games' attendances in the hundreds. Trnava are one of the very few clubs left with a proper supporters' base and a fan culture. "Here, a love for the club still exists, and there is a fans potential, which is missing in some parts of the country," Gasparik points out. "Also, when Trnava are high in the table, the interest is bigger than anywhere else. Trnava are also interesting for a Slovak market, we have a big media attention and many of our games are shown on TV. Wherever we go, people come to the stands, because they are curious.

"Maybe we don't have results like in the 1970s, but in Slovak terms, Spartak is a massive brand, and the fandom goes from generation to generation. Nobody has such potential as Spartak has."

Next year is Trnava's centenary year. What better way to celebrate their 100-year anniversary than by adding more trophies?



Spartak Trnava coach...Michal Gasparik watches on during the cup final

COUNTDOWN TO QATAR 2022 WORLD CUP

We begin our countdown to Qatar 2022 by taking a first look at all 32 teams and giving you the expert guide to their tactics, key players and questions to answer ahead of the Middle East's first World Cup

ASIA

QATAR

Hosts are ready to put on a show

● OVERVIEW

The wait, finally, is almost over for the hosts. The last few years has been a quest for as much competitive international action as possible. The Maroons have played in the Copa America, CONCACAF Gold Cup and even turned up during European qualification for the World Cup that is coming to Qatar, while also playing a part in Asian qualification too.

Winning the 2019 Asian Cup by some distance shows that the team certainly have talent. Efforts to have some of those stars playing in Europe have not really succeeded and the squad is now entirely based at home. This at least facilitates training camps and friendlies.

Coach Felix Sanchez, who started out as Barcelona youth coach, has been in place with the senior side since 2017 and has done well enough that the big-name coach that many expected to come and take over some time in 2020 or 2021, never arrived.

John Duerden

Dangerman... Almoez Ali

● TACTICS

Top scorers at the 2019 Asian Cup and 2021 Gold Cup, Qatar like to attack – and the Spanish influence is there to see. A 5-3-2 when defending seamlessly moves into a 3-5-2 when going forward. This is a well-organised, fluid and well-coached team, happy to press high.

STAR MAN

Akram AFIF
Usually starts as one of the front two but is given the freedom and licence to roam, the winger creates and also scores.

COACH

Felix SANCHEZ
Has been in Qatar for years, and has the team playing exactly how he wants. Could make a big name for himself this winter.

Will Qatar handle the big occasion?

An opener v Ecuador may seem kind, but nobody knows how the players will deal with the World Cup actually starting. They have been waiting for this since 2010 and it has not been the smoothest of journeys. That their first World Cup game is taking place on home soil and is seen as a must-win may all be a bit too much.

Can the defence stay strong?

Qatar have plenty of attacking talent but can be vulnerable at the back. There are sometimes gaps behind the midfield and, with the defenders slow in stepping out, opponents can often find opportunities. The back-line will have to stay strong.

Can Almoez Ali get the goals?

Ali burst onto the Asian scene with a record ten goals at the 2019 Asian Cup, became top scorer at the Gold Cup and also hit the target at the Copa America. Seen as one of Asia's top strikers, the 25-year-old needs to make his mark for the sake of his adopted homeland as well as a possible future career in Europe.

AUSTRALIA

Socceroos finally make it after torturous campaign

● OVERVIEW

After 1,008 days and 20 matches – of which only four were on home soil due to the pandemic – Australia qualified. Many feel it is a minor miracle, given the squad contains few stars and coach Graham Arnold isn't universally popular.

Just to reach Qatar is a big win for a game that suffers in comparison to Aussie rules, rugby league and cricket, which tend to swallow up all the money and media coverage. Therefore, the financial boost qualification gives, along with the co-hosting of the Women's World Cup in 2023, is a real shot in the arm for the sport.

However, a lot of work needs to be done in a short space of time ahead of the finals to make Australia truly competitive on the global stage. Drawn in a tough group alongside France, Denmark and Tunisia, the Socceroos will be rank outsiders. The good news is, they played the French and the Danes in the group stage in Russia, so they at least will be familiar foes.

Simon Hill

Penalty Shootout hero...Andrew Redmayne

● TACTICS

Graham Arnold employs a 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 system. This is probably his strongest XI when everyone is fit and available, but question marks remain over the availability and fitness of the two centre-backs, playmaker Tom Rogic and striker Adam Taggart.

STAR MAN

Martin BOYLE
Offers Australia the sort of directness and willingness to attack defenders they had long been missing before he was naturalised.

COACH

Graham ARNOLD
Spruiked "Aussie DNA" and "fighting spirit" as his main motivators ahead of the play-offs. Got the best out of a sub-par squad.

Is coach Graham Arnold's job safe?

His coaching career hung by a thread v Peru, when he made the biggest gamble of his life, subbing on penalty-saving specialist, Andrew Redmayne, in place of Mat Ryan. It paid off, but his brand of football isn't compared favourably with predecessor, Ange Postecoglou, who was seen as more of a visionary.

Who plays in the centre of defence?

Trent Sainsbury and Harry Souttar were the first-choice pairing for much of the qualifiers, but Souttar is recovering from a bad injury and Sainsbury didn't feature (due to a knee problem) in the play-offs. In their place, Bailey Wright and youngster Kye Rowles stepped up very capably.

What about Tom Rogic?

Rogic is the most talented Aussie of his generation and had a stellar campaign for Celtic, but he will turn 30 during the finals and his international career has been somewhat stop-start. He withdrew from the play-offs, leaving a big question mark over his future involvement.

ASIA

IRAN

Nation hopeful amidst chaotic preparations

● OVERVIEW

Iran's story of reaching Qatar 2022 was indeed a tale of two halves. In the second round of qualifying, two unexpected defeats against Bahrain and Iraq left them on the brink of elimination, leading to the sacking of Belgian manager Marc Wilmots.

In came the Croatian Dragan Skocic. His appointment swung the mood and ensured progress by overcoming three must-win games in the space of just eight days. In the final qualification round, eight wins out of ten matches secured Iran's place in Qatar as comprehensive group winners.

For many Iranians, playing against England and the United States in Qatar has an intriguing political aspect. As Iran prepare for their third consecutive World Cup for the first time, the nation expects them to make history by reaching the round of 16. However, lack of funds and catastrophic preparations cast dark shadows over their optimism.

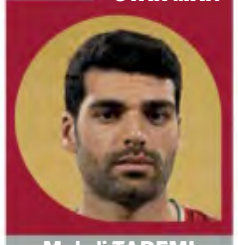
Adel Ferdowsipour

Prolific strikeforce... Azmoun and Taremi

● TACTICS

Pretty much like Russia 2018, compact defending and waiting for the counter-attacks to materialise will shape Iran's core strategy against opponents stronger on paper. The exciting partnership of the attacking duo, Sardar Azmoun and Mehdi Taremi, will pose the main threat.

STAR MAN



Mehdi TAREMI

Arguably the most influential player in Portugal's Primeira Liga with a tally of 20 goals and 12 assists last season.

COACH

Dragan SKOCIC

Won a couple of cups in Croatian and Slovenian club football, but Qatar will be his maiden experience on the international stage.

Can Iran prepare thoroughly?

As is often the case with Iranian football, the main source of concern is off the pitch. Due to international sanctions and lack of professional planning, organising appropriate friendly matches has proven to be *Mission Impossible*. To add to Iran's woes, the arranged friendly versus Canada was cancelled amid huge controversy.

How will they address the current leadership issues?

The Iranian Football Federation currently has no president after the previous one was sacked by the board. With Skocic being overly lenient on certain disciplinary issues, better leadership will be key in the months leading up to Qatar.

Will Skocic unveil any surprise names in his starting line-up?

Milad Mohammadi might play at left-back. Having ignored the popular picks, like Ramin Rezaeian and Voria Ghafouri, Skocic may shift Shoja Khalilzadeh to right-back. Ali Gholizadeh may get the nod given Vahid Amiri's current injury.

JAPAN

One of Asia's best may struggle in tough group

● OVERVIEW

Samurai Blue swept through the second round of Asian qualifying with a bucketful of goals – including a 14-0 victory in Mongolia and a 10-0 home win over Myanmar – scoring 46 times in eight games and conceding only twice. Takumi Minamino top-scored with nine goals and Yuya Osako netted eight.

Problems arose, however, when the national and Olympic teams were combined after the Olympic Games. Japan slumped to two defeats in their first three third-round qualifying ties, firstly in a massive shock at home to Oman, and then away to group pace-setters Saudi Arabia.

Needing, essentially, to win every match from there, that was exactly what they did with six straight victories, including revenge wins against Saudi Arabia and Oman and, crucially, victories home and away to Australia, eventually clinching their place at their seventh straight World Cup with a game to spare.

Mike Plastow

Joint-top scorer in qualifying... Takumi Minamino

● TACTICS

Japan's favoured formation is a 4-2-3-1 with two holding midfielders, a single striker and aggressive wing play. Tight at the back and swift going forward, they are most dangerous on the counter-attack – which is the ploy they'll need to adopt against Germany and Spain.

STAR MAN

Junya ITO

The speedy winger was Japan's saviour, scoring and setting up the goals that put Japan back on course in Asian qualifying.

COACH

Hajime MORIYASU

Japan's assistant coach in Russia. As manager, Moriyasu led Sanfrecce Hiroshima to three J. League titles from 2012-15.

Do Japan still have a centre-forward?

Yuya Osako remained Japan's first-choice centre-forward through qualifying, but his form has dropped for both club and country in the past year. Options include Takumi Minamino (level with Osako with ten goals in qualifying) – but that is not his best position – and the relatively untried Ayase Ueda or Ado Onaiwu.

Who will be selected on the wings?

Full-backs Yuto Nagatomo and Hiroki Sakai are both facing challenges from younger players such as Yuta Nakayama and Miki Yamane. Junya Ito is first choice further forward on the right but there are harder choices to make on the left, from the veteran skills of Genki Haraguchi to the dazzling dribbling of Kaoru Mitoma.

Will Takefusa Kubo find his feet?

The starlet has largely disappointed so far, but scored his first goal in the recent Kirin Cup. Immensely skilful, he has tight ball control and is entrusted with a lot of set-pieces, but still fails to connect well with team-mates in many vital situations.

SAUDI ARABIA

Flawless in qualifying but doubts remain on the big stage

● OVERVIEW

It was almost a perfect qualification campaign for Saudi Arabia, as they cruised through the second-round group stage and then ended up winning the toughest group ahead of Japan and Australia in round three. Four wins out of four put the team in a great position, and they then showed their new mettle with a battling 0-0 draw in Sydney against the Socceroos.

There was a single hiccup, and loss, against Japan but the Green Falcons bounced back. Under French coach Herve Renard, there is a new intensity and belief about the team. After they qualified for Russia 2018 they went through three coaches before that humiliating 5-0 curtain-raising loss to Russia. They should be better organised, on and off the pitch, this time round.

There is still the issue that the squad is entirely domestic-based and while that does lead to a lack of international exposure, it helps with preparations and training camps.

John Duerden

In a race against time to be fit...Saleh Al Shehri

● TACTICS

Under Renard, the team has graduated to a more patient, possession-based game but they are still able to get the ball forward quickly when necessary, with the full-backs especially bombing forward. Compared to Asia, they are likely to be more counter-attacking at the World Cup.

STAR MAN

Salem AL DAWSARI
The wideman has been perhaps the best Asian player in Asia over the past year or two. Often scores great goals.

COACH

Herve RENARD
Recently extended his deal to 2027 after breathing new life into the team. Made Saudi Arabia flexible, aggressive and confident.

What about the lack of strikers?

In a league where all clubs import strikers from around the world, the fact that not much game-time is given to locals gives Renard few options up front. Most of his options don't get regular minutes at home and may not be that sharp in Qatar.

Will the absentees be available?

Defensive midfielder Abdulellah Al Malki tore his cruciate ligament in February and soon after striker Saleh Al Shehri did his Achilles tendon. Both are hoping to be fit but that remains to be seen. Midfielder Mohamed Kanno is currently suspended from club football after signing contracts with two different clubs and winger Fawad Al Muwallad is serving a doping ban.

Do the Saudis have enough belief?

The team burst onto the global stage in 1994, making it to the last 16, but they have only won one game in four visits since – and that was a dead rubber against Egypt in 2018. They often shine in Asia but lack experience against the South American and European teams.

SOUTH KOREA

World-class Son means Korea always have a chance

● OVERVIEW

Clinching a place at a tenth successive World Cup – and an 11th appearance in total – with two games to spare represents both a blessing and a curse for South Korea.

The Taeguk Warriors always make it but don't often get the tests needed on their home continent, meaning they often come up short when it matters.

Performances were not overly impressive but there were signs of improvement towards the end of the qualifying campaign. It was no surprise then that preparation started against Brazil in June, but it ended with the Koreans being totally outclassed and losing 5-1 in Seoul.

Bridging that gap between Asia and Group H opponents Uruguay, Portugal and Ghana is the task at hand in the time remaining between now and Qatar. Much depends on the European-based players, whether the big names can stay fit and whether Portuguese coach Paulo Bento gets his tactics right.

John Duerden

Celebrating... Hwang Hee-chan

● TACTICS

Paulo Bento has tried various formations in his four years with one, two and three in attack. He likes to build from the back and midfield, but has been accused of overcautiousness, changing selections, and not playing to Korea's traditional strengths of attacking at speed.

STAR MAN

SON Heung-min
Much depends on their one world-class player. If the Premier League Golden Boot winner stays fit, then they have a chance.

COACH

Paulo BENTO
Yet to show he can get the best of the players. Korea were underwhelming at the 2019 Asian Cup and for much of qualification.

How can the Taeguk Warriors get the best out of Son Heung-min?

Hwang Ui-jo blows hot and cold for the national team. Son does not always look as happy for his country, where he sometimes tries to do too much, as for his club. Where and how to play him – wide or central – could be key.

Can the coach sort the defence?

Kim Min-jae missed Russia 2018 through injury as well as the June friendlies. The Fenerbahce centre-back is vital and was missed when Brazil found huge amounts of space in the final third. Experienced full-backs such as Lee Yong and Hong Chul look to be past their best too.

How should South Korea play?

Most teams in Asia tend to sit off the Koreans who end up with huge amounts of possession and packed defences to navigate past. That won't be the case in November. Will Paulo Bento sit back and look to use the pace of the forwards to counter-attack or will he take the game to Uruguay, Portugal and Ghana?

CONCACAF

CANADA

Back on the big stage after 36 years and ready to make a splash

● OVERVIEW

Canada hadn't previously reached the final stage of CONCACAF World Cup qualifying since France '98 (when they finished rock bottom), but this time around they came top to reach their first World Cup finals since 1986, going unbeaten in the first 11 of their 14 matches.

Les Rouges had to do without the talismanic Alphonso Davies for their last six qualifiers but still secured key results, including a 2-0 win over USA. The likes of Cyle Larin, Jonathan David and Tajon Buchanan ensured their attacking threat remained.

Belgium are the hot favourites in Group F, but Canada will hope to compete with Croatia and Morocco for a place in the knockout stages.

This World Cup will be an historic one for Canada, and there will be an extra incentive to make it a special one on the pitch with the potential to drive excitement before they co-host the 2026 edition.

Danny Lewis

Top scorer in the CONCACAF WC qualifiers ...Cyle Larin

● TACTICS

John Herdman showed tactical flexibility throughout qualifying, switching between various formations that included a back three and four. The 4-4-2 below could easily switch to a back three with Davies playing further forward than he does for Bayern Munich in either system.

STAR MAN

Jonathan DAVID
Canada have never scored a World Cup finals goal; don't be surprised if the 22-year-old is the man to change that.

COACH

John HERDMAN
After taking Canada's women to Olympic bronze twice, he'll hope to make the men's second World Cup one to remember.

Can they stay solid at the back?
Canada had the best defensive record in the final stage of CONCACAF qualifying, conceding only seven goals. However, Doneil Henry is struggling for minutes at LAFC and Steven Vitoria's Moreirense were relegated. This could open up the competition to play alongside Montreal centre-back Kamal Miller in defence.

Any dual-national additions to come?
After recruiting Ike Ugbo, Canada saw Arsenal youngster Marcelo Flores pledge his allegiance to Mexico. Still, Espanyol teenager Luca Koleosho joined Herdman's latest squad and there are hopes Radnicki Nis attacker Stefan Mitrovic will follow.

Will they be prepared?
Canada were set to face Iran in a friendly before cancelling it after receiving criticism. Having scrambled to secure Panama as a replacement, that fixture was cancelled too due to a dispute between the players and association. Their last game against a side outside of CONCACAF was 28 matches ago – versus Iceland in January 2020.

COSTA RICA

CONCACAF's form team after flying finish to qualifying

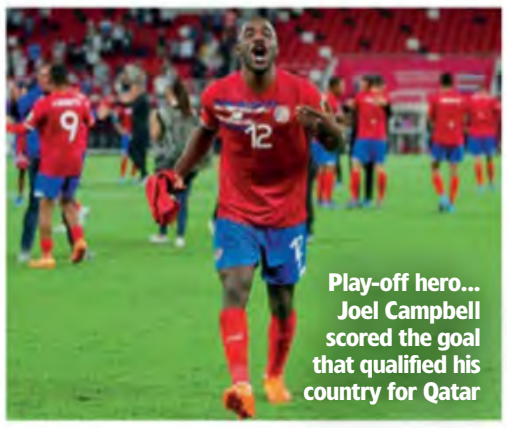
● OVERVIEW

After seven games in CONCACAF World Cup qualifying, Costa Rica seemed hopeless. One win, three draws and three defeats (albeit against Mexico, USA and Canada) was the poor balance of an ageing and slow team.

Since then, Luis Fernando Suarez's *Los Ticos* side have made an incredible transformation. An 11-match unbeaten streak, which included a revenge win over the USA and a draw with Mexico at the Estadio Azteca, saw them climb from seventh to fourth in the CONCACAF standings, and then beat New Zealand in the inter-confederational play-offs to book their ticket to Qatar.

There was really no miraculous reason on the part of coach Suarez. It just took a few months of his stint for his players to understand what he wanted from them, and that, plus the returns of injured goalkeeper Keylor Navas and forward Joel Campbell, worked the Costa Rican turnaround.

Martin del Palacio Langer



Play-off hero... Joel Campbell scored the goal that qualified his country for Qatar

● TACTICS

Suarez began his stint in charge looking to play with a back four, which he still maintains for certain moments, but in recent games the team has deployed a 5-4-1. Although more defensive, it allows them to take advantage of their speed on the wings and launch counter-attacks.

STAR MAN

Keylor NAVAS
Winner of three Champions League titles with Real Madrid and today at PSG, he is the heart and soul of the team.

COACH

Luis Fernando SUAREZ
Qualified Ecuador for the World Cup in 2006, Honduras in 2014 and now Costa Rica when all seemed lost.

Which new boys will shine?
The generational changeover has not been easy. The heroes of 2014 – Navas, Campbell, Oscar Duarte, Celso Borges, Francisco Calvo and Bryan Ruiz still provide the base. However, if they want to have a good World Cup, Costa Rica need new boys like winger Gerson Torres and striker Anthony Contreras to step up.

What will the team's tactics be?
Everything seems to indicate that, in a group with Germany and Spain, Suarez will play with a back five. The problem is that it is a very cautious system, and *Los Ticos* will hardly be able to generate any danger with only three men up front.

Will they renew the midfield?
Costa Rica have some new young talent in defence and attack, but in midfield there is still no renewal. The starters, Borges and Yeltsin Tejeda, are over 30 and the alternative is the even more veteran Ruiz. Defensive midfielder Orlando Galo looked good against the USA, but at 21 he still doesn't seem ready for a leading role.

MEXICO

Criticism and doubts ahead of kick-off

● OVERVIEW

For a country whose last seven World Cups have been marked by stability (seven consecutive exits in the round of 16), Mexico never seem too far from hysteria. Every four years, fans experience a crisis of confidence with their national team in the months leading up to the tournament.

Despite calmly qualifying for Qatar 2022, manager Tata Martino is highly unpopular with the press and fans, who routinely demand his departure from the team. They accuse him of having "favourites", complain about his conservative style and second-guess his every decision on and off the pitch.

The reality is that the national team has not played well in two years, and the heavy 3-0 defeat in June's friendly against Uruguay in the United States sounded the alarm bells again, but the situation is not too different from that experienced by other coaches in the past.

Martin del Palacio Langer

Raul Jimenez... can he rediscover his golden touch?

● TACTICS

Having tried a 5-2-3 formation, which resulted in disaster against Uruguay, it is clear that coach Martino will stick with the 4-3-3 system he has used throughout his stint, with essentially the same player base that he used throughout the World Cup qualifiers.

STAR MAN

Guillermo OCHOA
The veteran goalkeeper is *El Tri*'s safest bet in Qatar. As reliable as ever, he doesn't seem to have lost his trademark reflexes.

COACH

Tata MARTINO
The halo of having managed Barcelona and Argentina with which he arrived has completely disappeared.

Will Mexico recover their form?

Martino's reign began with 17 games without defeat and wins against South Korea, Japan and the Netherlands. But, as of 2021, the team's form has collapsed. Three defeats to USA and pyrrhic wins in CONCACAF have fans on their toes.

What about Raul Jimenez?

One of the great reasons for *El Tri*'s good moment was the excellent level of their No.9 but, after his horrendous head injury with Wolves in the Premier League, he has never been the same. His problem doesn't seem to be physical but rather one of confidence, and he only has a few months left to recover it, for the good of *El Tri*.

Will Chicharito come back?

Jimenez's bad form is accentuated by the lack of options to replace him. There isn't a player remotely close to his quality in LigaMX, which has led to a campaign to recall Javier Hernandez, sidelined two years ago but reborn in MLS. There have been approaches between him and Martino but, so far, nothing definitive.

UNITED STATES

Sky-high expectations for talented young squad

● OVERVIEW

Having disastrously failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, the United States are back on the global stage. A stage on which they have big ambitions.

Since that 2018 disappointment, they have won a couple of CONCACAF regional tournaments – the Gold Cup and Nations League – but qualification for the 2022 World Cup was always the main aim.

They finished third in the eight-team round-robin, behind Canada and Mexico, and ahead of Costa Rica on goal difference, which was enough to go straight to Qatar and avoid an inter-confederational play-off.

Taking four points from Mexico was a highlight, and may signal a power shift to the north of the region.

Supporters are pleased with the group-stage draw, and this squad is considered one of their most talented player pools ever. This all means there will be high expectations in Qatar come November.

James Nalton

Bright talent... Brenden Aaronson

● TACTICS

Variations on a 4-3-3 formation have been a mainstay under coach Gregg Berhalter. From this shape, they aim to keep possession and press to varying levels depending on the opposition. Settling on suitable players in each area to execute this plan will be key.

STAR MAN

Christian PULISIC
The busy attacker from Pennsylvania remains the first name on the US teamsheet despite the emergence of other stars.

COACH

Gregg BERHALTER
Approaching four years in charge, he has worked on possession and pressing to get the most from this talented bunch.

Zack Steffen or Matt Turner in goal?

It's Manchester City's back-up keeper v Arsenal's reserve keeper for the starting spot between the sticks. Steffen has been considered the one who will play out from the back more effectively, but Turner is a much better shot-stopper. Both playing back-up for their clubs isn't ideal.

Who is the No.9?

The US have struggled to find a consistent replacement for Jozy Altidore in attack. Several players have made a case only to see their careers interrupted by injury (Daryl Dike) or inconsistency for their club (Ricardo Pepi). FC Dallas forward Jesus Ferreira could well be the answer.

Injuries to potential starters...

Atlanta United's Miles Robinson would be pushing to start in defence but a ruptured Achilles will likely see him miss the World Cup. Other potential starters including defender Chris Richards, right-back Sergino Dest and gifted attacker Gio Reyna all suffered untimely injuries which have affected preparations.

EUROPE

BELGIUM

Golden generation looking past its best

● OVERVIEW

Belgium's golden generation is past its peak. The Belgians will always cherish Kazan where they defeated Brazil in a 2018 World Cup match for the ages, but ultimately Kevin De Bruyne and co. have never won a major prize.

Last summer's Euro 2020 finals was a massive disappointment. Playing in a low block to help protect the ageing defence, Belgium eliminated defending champions Portugal in the last 16, but then exited against eventual winners Italy in the quarter-finals.

This gut-wrenching elimination was followed by some more soul-searching after 28 catastrophic minutes against France in the 2020-21 Nations League final four. Belgium and coach Roberto Martinez's in-game management always seem to come up short against the big teams – June's 4-1 defeat to the Netherlands another case in point. Martinez admitted it is time to question some household names. Even if he does, it may be too little too late.

Samindra Kunti

Experience...ageing duo Alderweireld and Vertonghen

● TACTICS

The team lines up in a 3-4-3 formation, but Martinez has never developed a real plan B. Vulnerable, the old defence allows too much space in between the lines. The likes of defender Boyata, midfielder Tielemans, wing-back Carrasco and wide forward Trossard are also viable starters.

STAR MAN

Kevin DE BRUYNE

Ex aequo between him and Thibaut Courtois, both outstanding – if not the best in the world – in their positions.

COACH

Roberto MARTINEZ

Led Belgium to third spot at the last World Cup, but his game management and loyalty to established players are liabilities.

Is this the end of the line for the Red Devils' golden generation?

It will certainly be their last major tournament and Belgium need all their best players to perform at their best to compete. A quick glance across the XI suggests this may be a problem in Qatar.

What area of the pitch is of the most concern right now?

Up front, where Romelu Lukaku endured a torrid season with Chelsea, scoring just eight Premier League goals. Perhaps he will regain his form and confidence once he returns to Inter? Injury-prone Eden Hazard is also a shadow of his former self.

Are there any defensive alternatives?

Fitness in the broader sense of the word is a concern for veteran defenders Jan Vertonghen and Toby Alderweireld. Into their 30s, they lack the pace and intensity required for a major tournament. With few alternatives, Martinez will remain loyal to the pair, but they might well become symbols of a team for which Qatar 2022 will have simply proven a step too far.

CROATIA

2018 runners-up aiming to cause a shock again

● OVERVIEW

Since their independence, Croatia have only missed two major finals – Euro 2000 and World Cup 2010 – and after finishing third at France '98 and second in 2018, they'll be hoping to surprise everyone once again this winter.

Qualification for Qatar started with a shock defeat in Slovenia, but a narrow win over Russia on the final matchday sealed automatic qualification.

Since their triumphant run to the World Cup final in 2018, the team has experienced a change of generations, but 36-year-old Luka Modric remains key, and Qatar is likely to be his farewell.

Since Mario Mandzukic's retirement, the centre-forward role has been an acute problem, while a longer-term issue has been right-back amid Sime Vrsaljko's persistent injury problems.

There are no such problems in midfield, where Croatia have one of the best array of talent in the world in the form of Modric, Marcelo Brozovic, Mateo Kovacic, Mario Pasalic and Lovro Majer.

Zdravko Reic

Midfield talent... Kovacic in action

● TACTICS

After briefly experimenting with three defenders in a couple of friendlies this year, Dalic has reverted to a back four. The midfield is a diamond shape, although a loan striker is sometimes deployed in a 4-2-3-1 system. This manoeuvring largely depends on the set-up of the opposition.

STAR MAN

Luka MODRIC

Simply irreplaceable. The greatest Croatian player of all time and a true leader on and off the field.

COACH

Zlatko DALIC

An extraordinary communicator with a modern philosophy, Dalic remarkably observes situations on the field.

What is the main goal in Qatar?

Croatia's first objective will be to qualify from the group. That is the minimum that will be expected, otherwise the finals will be deemed a failure like group-stage exits in 2002, 2006 and 2014. To go beyond that will depend on the quality of their opponents and having their best XI fit.

What is coach Dalic's main focus?

Given the extensive UEFA Nations League programme and club competitions before Qatar 2022, the biggest concern for the coach is the health of his key players. It is especially important that veterans Modric, Brozovic, Kovacic, Ivan Perisic and Andrej Kramaric are 100 per cent fit and ready.

Are there any major selection issues?

Dalic has previously insisted that he will only pick players featuring regularly at club level, which has caused a headache over one of his previous standout stars – West Ham United's Nikola Vlasic. Dalic won't want to dispense with his services, so will likely select him for the Nations League to ensure he has regular action.

DENMARK

Tournament dark horses in red-hot form

International comeback ...talismanic midfielder Christian Eriksen

● OVERVIEW

Denmark qualified in swift and impressive style, reaching the World Cup after just eight of their ten group matches. These were all victories, with 27 goals scored and none conceded – the latter a record-breaking statistic. No nation in European qualifying had achieved that before. It underlines the huge confidence in the Danish team that reached the semi-finals of the European Championship after the trauma of seeing talisman Christian Eriksen collapse on the pitch during the opening match of the tournament.

The journey has continued to be emotional, not least with the unlikely but heartwarming return to the side of Eriksen himself. Denmark will be regarded as dark horses for this World Cup, but much may depend on whether key players like Simon Kjaer, Mikkel Damsgaard and Martin Braithwaite can fully recover from long-term injuries and get proper playing time at their clubs.

Jim Holden

Concern...will captain Simon Kjaer be fit?

● TACTICS

The preferred system is a tried and tested 4-3-3, but Kasper Hjulmand has developed a flexibility that means he can alter the set-up according to both the strength of his opponents and the loss of their own players. Both 4-3-1-2 and 3-4-2-1 have been used to good effect.

STAR MAN

Kasper SCHMEICHEL

A mighty presence and a strong voice. Eight consecutive clean sheets in qualifying was a new record.

COACH

Kasper HJULMAND

Has a fabulous win-rate as Denmark coach and provides inspirational and emotionally intelligent leadership.

Will captain and inspirational leader Simon Kjaer be fit for the finals?

Kjaer has been sidelined since December 2021 after sustaining a serious ACL injury, but aims to return for Milan in the new season. He has vowed to return stronger than ever, but that can never be certain.

Who will score in the big games?

Denmark had 18 different goalscorers in qualifying, yet the joint-most prolific was left-back Joakim Maehle with five. The return of Eriksen will clearly help, but the Danes need a striker to provide quality in the box. Various attacking combinations have so far been used in the form of Skov Olsen, Poulsen, Cornelius and Dolberg.

Is playing France again a good omen?

Four years ago Denmark drew 0-0 with France and qualified for the knockouts. Twenty years ago France arrived at the 2002 World Cup as champions and lost 2-0 to Denmark to suffer an instant exit from the tournament. After beating them in the UEFA Nations League in June, the Danes may well have *Les Blues'* number.

EUROPE

ENGLAND

Southgate doubts threaten squad harmony

Top talent...Bukayo Saka is one of a number of promising England youngsters

● OVERVIEW

The public mood around England took something of a nosedive during June's Nations League fixtures – four games that featured no wins, no goals from open play and two defeats to Hungary, the second of which was England's worst defeat on home soil since 1928.

Reaching the 2018 World Cup semi-finals and Euro 2020 final has increased expectations for Southgate and his side, while his critics continue to insist that Southgate's cautiousness is holding back one of the most talented generations of English players of all time.

Yet Southgate will not change. Indeed, June's poor performances – partly explained by an exhausted and heavily-rotated squad – will probably encourage him to double down on his belief that a solid, controlled approach is the best route to international success.

Proving so with good results against Germany and Italy in September will be vital in restoring the confidence of both fans and players.

Jamie Evans

Setback...Kane reacts during England's 4-0 loss to Hungary

● TACTICS

England's implosion against Hungary – where two advanced midfielders started in a 4-3-3 – is likely to have increased Southgate's faith in the 3-4-3 formation that began the Euro 2020 final. The 4-2-3-1 shape used against Germany in Munich could be an alternative.

STAR MAN

Harry KANE

The talismanic captain is on the verge of breaking England's all-time goal record. Top scorer at the last World Cup.

COACH

Gareth SOUTHGATE

A World Cup semi-final and silver medal at Euro 2020 has not been enough to protect Southgate from increasing pressure.

What area is the biggest concern?

Defence. June's squad lacked a natural left-back, with Ben Chilwell and Luke Shaw both injured, while the other side had the opposite problem with five right-backs called up. In the centre, Harry Maguire remains simultaneously one of Southgate's most trusted lieutenants and one of England's most criticised players.

Can the attacking output improve?

Beyond the introduction of an extra attacker in a 4-2-3-1 formation, the inclusion of Jude Bellingham in England's midfield should offer a greater attacking threat than Kalvin Phillips. Fan favourite Jack Grealish has more flair than Mason Mount, but must "improve tactically" to nail his place in Southgate's XI.

Just how good is this England squad?

Clearly England have a lot of top players, some with the potential to be world class, but other than Harry Kane none are quite on that level yet. A well-organised unit is likely to be the foundation of any success, rather than individual performances.

FRANCE

Massive talent pool but capable of imploding

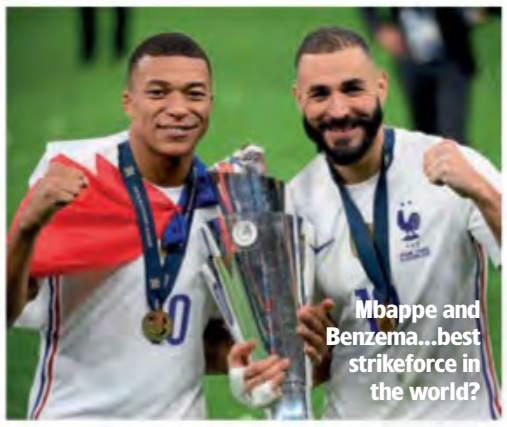
● OVERVIEW

Boasting arguably the tournament's deepest squad, holders France will be many people's favourites. Although this may be the last World Cup for the likes of Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Hugo Lloris and Antoine Griezmann, Ligue 1's prolific talent production has kept the squad fresh with Christopher Nkunku, Aurelien Tchouameni and Kylian Mbappe still all 24 or younger.

France went undefeated in qualifying but drew three of their first five games amid press murmurings of discontent following a disappointing Euro 2020, part of a run of five draws. Deschamps relied upon Griezmann, who scored five of France's first eight goals in Group D before an 8-0 thrashing of Kazakhstan.

A meeting with Tunisia could prove tricky in Qatar, but Denmark should be France's only major obstacle to topping their section – the pair drew a dire game 0-0 in 2018, while the Danes recently beat France during June's 2022-23 Nations League games.

Adam White

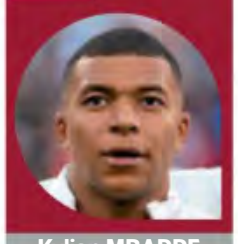


Mbappe and Benzema...best strikeforce in the world?

● TACTICS

Having relied largely on defensive solidity and organisation for World Cup glory in 2018, Benzema's return marked a more expansive evolution. However, underlined by the Euro 2020 exit to Switzerland, consistent balance has yet to be found with Deschamps continually tinkering.

STAR MAN



Kylian MBAPPE
Provided 39 goals and 26 assists last term with a serene authority to his play. Look set to become this generation's leading player.

COACH

Didier DESCHAMPS
Despite the 2018 World Cup win and 2020-21 Nations League victory, many remain sniffy over his lack of style and flair.

Who will play at right-wing-back?

France's only problem position. Benjamin Pavard offers little in attack while Lyon captain Leo Dubois' form has evaporated. Kingsley Coman, deployed here of late, is an unusually gung-ho pick by Deschamps and ahead of newcomer Jonathan Clauss.

Could the France camp implode?

Thoughts of Raymond Domenech's 2010 South Africa nightmare and 2002's shock capitulation are never too far away. But Deschamps' focus on togetherness over pound-for-pound talent has paid off, producing an unusually harmonious squad. Things seem rosy, for now.

Is this Deschamps' last tournament?

After a decade in charge, Deschamps' contract expires at the end of the year. A second triumph could see him step back while another underperformance, coupled with dour football, might push the FFF to look elsewhere. Zinedine Zidane rejected PSG's advances for months as he reportedly eyed Deschamps' position post-Qatar.

GERMANY

Rediscovering their form under Flick

● OVERVIEW

Germany, the first European country to punch their ticket for Qatar 2022, were victorious in nine of their ten qualifiers, though they did suffer the embarrassment of losing 2-1 at home to North Macedonia in March 2021. The unexpected loss in Duisburg was only the *Nationalmannschaft*'s third-ever defeat in a World Cup qualifier and the first since 2001 (when losing 5-1 in Munich to England).

After the setbacks of the latter part of Joachim Low's long reign as *Bundestrainer* – notably the dismal exits from World Cup 2018 and Euro 2020 – Hansi Flick has successfully righted the ship, reinstalling a winning mentality, collective togetherness and more attacking slickness.

To complement the experienced players already at Flick's disposal, a crop of talented youngsters have also broken through in the form of Karim Adeyemi, Nico Schlotterbeck, Jamal Musiala and – injury permitting – Florian Wirtz.

Nick Bidwell

Flick's man... Timo Werner

● TACTICS

As was his wont during his fruitful spell at Bayern, Flick swears by a 4-2-3-1 formation, a system in which his players – especially those in attack – have the freedom to use their initiative and rotate positionally. In possession, the template changes to a 3-2-5 or even a 3-1-6.

STAR MAN

Thomas MULLER
As hungry to contribute as ever. A fine attacking-third operative, full of guile and Johnny-on-the-spot opportunism.

COACH

Hansi FLICK
An astute, rational team-builder with a bold, pro-active approach and excellent man-management skills.

Who would be the best choice as back-line director of operations?

Antonio Rudiger appears to be the ideal candidate, a stopper just born to inspire with his ferocious will-to-win, muscular physicality and limitless energy. Another possibility would be Niklas Sule, who'd do the job in a more restrained way.

In which position do Germany have the most strength in depth?

Undoubtedly the number ten slot, where the likes of Thomas Muller, Marco Reus, Ilkay Gundogan and Kai Havertz all are made of the right stuff. Luckily for Flick, each of these players are versatile and able to slot into alternative roles.

With striker Timo Werner out of favour at Chelsea, should he fear losing his place in the starting XI?

Ever since taking over as head coach in August 2021, Hansi Flick has steadfastly stood by Werner and probably will likely continue to do so. There is no German Lewandowski and, in any case, Flick loves Werner's pace and directness.

EUROPE

NETHERLANDS

Talented Dutch aiming to make impact after missing out last time

Oranje...the Dutch line up in the UEFA Nations League

● OVERVIEW

After losing 4-2 away to Turkey the *Oranje* made a poor start in qualifying, and failing to reach consecutive World Cups was a real possibility.

But, following a disappointing Euro 2020, coach Frank de Boer resigned. The Dutch FA turned to the only man they trusted to steady the ship: Louis van Gaal. The 70-year-old started with a 1-1 draw in Norway, and then they controlled the group with Norway and Turkey dropping points. However, in the penultimate game against Montenegro they almost blew it by throwing away a 2-0 advantage in the last ten minutes.

It all came down to the last game. Sitting in a wheelchair after breaking his hip, Van Gaal guided his team to a 2-0 win over Norway in an empty De Kuip.

Question marks remain over the XI with many talented stars not guaranteed a place in the starting line-up – De Vrij, De Ligt, Koopmeiners, Gravenberch, Gakpo, et al. – but Van Gaal's final decision on such calls remains trusted.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Young talent... can Cody Gakpo force his way into the XI?

● TACTICS

Van Gaal has switched from 4-3-3 to 5-3-2 – just like he did before the 2014 World Cup when the Netherlands finished third. The experienced coach wants more security in defence, while he also believes he lacks good enough wingers to play with three up front.

STAR MAN

Virgil VAN DIJK

Commanding central defender and skipper, who missed Euro 2020 through injury. Will be vital on and off the pitch.

COACH

Louis VAN GAAL

In his third spell in charge, Van Gaal will retire after the World Cup after revealing he is suffering from prostate cancer.

Is there a place for the previously influential Georginio Wijnaldum?

Wijnaldum was omitted from the Nations League squad in June due to his lack of game time at PSG. Unless things change, he may fail to regain his place for Qatar.

Who will be the first-choice keeper?

With no world-class keeper available, Van Gaal picked the unknown Mark Flekken – who has never played in the Eredivisie – labelling the Freiburg man as "a Van Gaal goalkeeper". Feyenoord's Justin Bijlow looks the best option, but he is injury prone, meaning Jasper Cillessen got the nod recently. Van Gaal also likes to pick a penalty specialist, but it is hard to see Tim Krul repeating his heroics of 2014.

Who will be the joker in the pack?

Van Gaal has made some surprise calls recently – AZ defender Bruno Martins Indi, who hadn't played since 2017, got another chance, while Bologna's Jerdy Schouten also got a call-up. The biggest shock was recalling Vincent Janssen, who hit just three goals in 28 games in Mexico.

POLAND

Poles qualified amid off-field turbulence

● OVERVIEW

Poland needed only one game in the European play-offs to seal qualification for the World Cup, but before that it was an emotional rollercoaster.

They finished second in Group I behind England, but due to Portuguese head coach Paulo Sousa's inexplicable decision to field a weakened side in the last game against Hungary, Poland were defeated 2-1, meaning they went into the play-offs unseeded and were drawn away to Russia.

In December Sousa unexpectedly terminated his contract, and in January Czeslaw Michniewicz replaced him. When the war broke out in Ukraine, the Polish FA chairman Cezary Kulesza, together with the players, officially announced that they would not play the "aggressor's team".

When FIFA and UEFA excluded Russia from all competitions Poland automatically entered the play-off final, where they played unexpectedly well to beat Sweden 2-0 in Chorzow.

Dariusz Kurowski

On target... Lewandowski

● TACTICS

In his first four matches in charge, head coach Michniewicz started with different formations – 3-4-3, 4-2-3-1, 4-3-1-2 and 4-5-1 – and always made further adjustments during the games themselves depending on the situation. The 52-year-old explained: "We must have alternatives."

STAR MAN

Robert LEWANDOWSKI
European Golden Shoe winner for the past two seasons. Poland's most capped player and record goalscorer.

COACH

Czeslaw MICHNIEWICZ
Described as "a specialist for special tasks", he took over after Paulo Sousa's unexpected exit.

Will transfer speculation affect key players' form and usefulness?
Lewandowski's endless transfer saga over leaving Bayern means that it is still unclear where and how he will play next season. The Italian media has speculated that Zielinski could also leave Napoli in the summer, while Krychowiak's future is uncertain after his loan spell at AEK from Russian club Krasnodar ended.

Will the UEFA Nations League help improve the chemistry of the team?
Michniewicz only had one friendly to experiment before the World Cup play-off against Sweden. Time should now be on his side in the Nations League, where the team will better understand his tactics.

Can Poland finally find a left-back?
Left-back has been a problem position for ten years, with successive coaches unable to find a solution. Tymoteusz Puchacz has been given a chance recently, but so far Michniewicz's first choice seems to be Sampodria's Bartosz Bereszynski, nominally a right-back.

PORTUGAL

Glut of talent but still unable to make it all gel

● OVERVIEW

For years Portugal have had an outrageously rich talent pool to pick from, but the wealth of superstar players at the nation's disposal has not resulted in the frighteningly dangerous and powerful team that *Selecao* fans believe it should have.

The lack of cohesion was plain to see at Euro 2020 and during a fraught 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign. Portugal eventually got the job done in the play-offs, beating Turkey and North Macedonia, but were fortunate to avoid having to battle it out with European champions Italy for a place in Qatar, and the football remained uninspiring.

Nevertheless, Fernando Santos is the most successful (and longest-serving) Portugal coach of all time, and the sheer number and variety of elite-level players available to him makes it foolish to outright dismiss the Portuguese as contenders to lift the trophy in December.

Tom Kundert

Ronaldo... no longer a certainty?

● TACTICS

A staunch 4-4-2 advocate – the system he deployed during their victorious Euro 2016 campaign – Fernando Santos has dallied with a 4-3-3 formation on occasion. Given the lavishly skilled attacking weapons at his disposal, this set-up could be what we see in Qatar.

STAR MAN

Bernardo SILVA
The few times Portugal have clicked in the past two years, he has been at the heart of it. Increasingly influential.

COACH

Fernando SANTOS
The lustre from winning Euro 2016 has worn off, with fans frustrated at his inability to get the best out of a superb squad.

Should Ronaldo be a lock?
It remains akin to heresy to suggest Cristiano Ronaldo should not be in Portugal's starting XI, but for the first time in almost two decades CR7 needs Portugal more than Portugal needs CR7. The *Selecao*'s greatest-ever player can still be the difference-maker for his national side, but playing 90 minutes of every game no longer makes sense.

Can Joao Felix realise his potential?
Flashes of Felix's phenomenal ability have been largely restricted to his club career, and sporadic, since his move to Atletico Madrid in 2019. Yet to hit his stride in a Portugal shirt, unlocking the best of Joao Felix could turn Portugal into genuine World Cup contenders.

Are Bruno Fernandes and Bernardo Silva incompatible?
The dream scenario for Portugal fans would be for both players to replicate for their country the magnificent form they display in midfield when wearing their club shirts in Manchester.

EUROPE

SERBIA

Unknown quantity could be Qatar's surprise package

● OVERVIEW

The Serbians qualified as group winners – against the odds – ahead of favourites Portugal, Republic of Ireland, Luxembourg and Azerbaijan.

Decisive was a 2-1 victory against Portugal in Lisbon on the last day of the campaign, thanks to a 90th-minute winner by talismanic centre-forward Aleksandar Mitrovic. It is believed that Dragan Stojkovic, who took over as Serbia head coach only a couple of weeks before the start of the World Cup qualifiers, deserves much of the credit for this unqualified success.

Stojkovic insists on attacking football and, indeed, the biggest strong point of this Serbian team is individual quality in attacking play, plus creating and converting chances – they scored eight goals in the games against main group rivals Portugal and Republic of Ireland.

Areas of concern are a poor defence and problems in building up play from the back – something Stojkovic will attempt to remedy before Qatar.

Vladimir Novak

Goal king... Aleksandar Mitrovic

● TACTICS

The lack of a quality right-back practially forced head coach Stojkovic to play three central defenders and wing-backs. The alternative option is a 3-5-2 with two centre-forwards (Mitrovic and Vlahovic). In that variant Lukic is benched with Milinkovic-Savic dropping further back.

STAR MAN

Dusan TADIC
Possibly the best player in his position outside Europe's top five leagues. Stopping him is easier said than done.

COACH

Dragan STOJKOVIC
The ex-world-class player insists on attacking football. Not content with simply winning, he wants his team to show *jogo bonito*.

Can Serbia improve their defence?
A clean sheet almost seems like *Mission Impossible* for this team, who conceded nine goals in eight qualifiers, several of them after unforced errors. Given the short time Stojkovic has at his disposal to try to sort things out, it looks unlikely that Serbia's defence will be rock solid.

Will Dusan Vlahovic, who had back-to-back 20+ goal seasons in Serie A, be content with a substitute's role?
Unlikely but, on the other hand, if Serbia play a 3-5-2 system with both Mitrovic and Vlahovic in the starting XI (plus three offensive players in Tadic, Lazovic and Kostic) such tactics could prove too risky – especially against strong opposition.

Can any potential internal issues be avoided this time around?
It's almost tradition for past Serbia teams (and Yugoslavia before that) that the good atmosphere generated after a successful qualification campaign falls apart for some reason or another. Serbia fans will hope that won't be the case this time around.

SPAIN

Experimental Spaniards a dangerous proposition

● OVERVIEW

It took longer than everybody had expected, Spain forced into a final game showdown, a straight shootout between them and Sweden for first place in the group that wasn't settled until a solitary goal in the 86th minute from Alvaro Morata, but the *Seleccion* did eventually make it to their 12th consecutive World Cup.

When he was asked what he felt when the decisive goal went in, Dani Olmo simply said: "relief". Spain had struggled, especially against deep defences, drawing with Greece at home and needing a penalty to beat them by a single goal away, losing in Sweden, beating Georgia with a 92nd-minute winner, and now this.

Their success at the European Championship last summer, plus UEFA Nations League performances against Italy and France last season, mean there is some cause for optimism, but it is cautious. Spain dominate possession; making it count is the question.

Sid Lowe

Gavi...midfield wonderkid

● TACTICS

"The players I have chosen and with whom I hope to be able to compete are players built to keep the ball, have it in the opposition's half, for the goalkeeper to play and commit their forward, even if it gives fans a heart attack," Spain boss Luis Enrique says.

STAR MAN

Ansu FATI
The second youngest player to score for Spain – Gavi recently took his record – has something special about him.

COACH

Luis ENRIQUE
"I don't have any doubts at all," Luis Enrique says and that line defines him: clear, direct, determined and hyper-competitive.

Who is the back four?
Spain's identity is clear; the identity of its defenders, less so. None of the four positions are 100 per cent secure, with various combinations used recently, but it feels fairly certain that Aymeric Laporte will be one of them. There's a vulnerability that concerns, but a determination that they have to play, not just defend.

Can Ansu Fati stay fit?
Ansu is only 19 and yet he scored his last (and his first) goal for Spain almost two years ago. The excitement around him remains, and he has something a little different to the rest, but it comes with concern now after injuries meant he was able to play just ten league games last season and seven the season before.

Are the kids ready?
Euro 2020 demonstrated that when it comes to Pedri, the answer is absolutely yes. Now another young Barcelona player is emerging, and excelling, under Luis Enrique. At just 17 years old, 18 in August, is Gavi ready too?

SWITZERLAND

Perennial qualifiers ready to make the step up

● OVERVIEW

Switzerland qualified for their fifth successive World Cup after an unbeaten qualifying campaign that saw them top their group by two points ahead of Italy.

With an accomplished, experienced squad that stunned world champions France at Euro 2020, Switzerland will be looking to reach the quarter-finals for the first time since 1954 and maybe go even further.

Head coach Vladimir Petkovic resigned after Euro 2020 but has been seamlessly replaced by Murat Yakin and Switzerland conceded only one goal in six qualifying matches under his leadership.

Their final group match against Serbia is politically charged due to the number of Swiss players who are ethnic Albanians or of Kosovar heritage. Switzerland beat Serbia 2-1 at the last World Cup and goalscorers Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri both celebrated with a gesture that imitated the eagle on Albania's flag.

Brian Homewood

Leader... Granit Xhaka

● TACTICS

Yakin has binned his predecessor's three-man defence, preferring 4-2-3-1, though he sometimes switches to 4-4-2. Key players are Yann Sommer, defenders Manuel Akanji and Ricardo Rodriguez and midfielders Granit Xhaka, Remo Freuler and Xherdan Shaqiri.

STAR MAN

Xherdan SHAQIRI
Despite an often frustrating club career, he remains the team's most flamboyant player. This will be Shaqiri's fourth World Cup.

COACH

Murat YAKIN
Appointed after Euro 2020. Had a successful spell at Basel, then coached Spartak Moscow, Grasshoppers and Schaffhausen.

Is Granit Xhaka indispensable?
Many thought yes, but Switzerland fared perfectly well without their captain when he missed the last four matches of the qualifying campaign through injury, and he faces fierce competition from Denis Zakaria, Remo Freuler and Djibril Sow for a place in front of the defence.

Will Breel Embolo stay injury-free?
Embolo is the favourite to lead the Swiss attack – as long as he can stay free of injuries. The Cameroon-born forward has had dreadful luck, with two serious injuries early in his career and also had two muscular injuries in the first half of last season.

Do they suffer too many off-days?
There have been a few games at recent tournaments where Switzerland have simply not turned up. The 5-2 defeat by France in 2014, their dismal round of 16 defeat to Sweden in 2018 and their 3-0 defeat to Italy at Euro 2020 are the clearest examples. Will they be mentally prepared this time round?

WALES

Dragons aim to make the most of first appearance since 1958

● OVERVIEW

"It's the greatest result in the history of Welsh football," said Wales talisman and captain Gareth Bale following the 1-0 play-off final victory over Ukraine in June that confirmed that Wales will end a 64-year wait to compete on the world stage.

Finishing as runners-up in Group E behind Belgium ensured a home play-off against Austria in March as Bale scored twice in the 2-1 victory, and his deflected free-kick against Ukraine in Cardiff proved decisive in making history.

This is a talented generation and for manager Rob Page the strength in depth combined with the youth and experience available to him is a luxury afforded to none of his predecessors.

Qualifying for the Euros in 2016 and 2020 set a new standard and raised expectations, but a first World Cup appearance since 1958 will take Welsh football to a completely new level.

Mark Pitman

Dynamic duo... Ramsey and Bale

● TACTICS

A 3-4-2-1 formation has become the preferred system with an emphasis on attacking wide play and using the pace of Bale and Brennan Johnson or Dan James in attack. Midfielders Joe Allen and Aaron Ramsey play a crucial role in allowing the wing-backs to push on.

STAR MAN

Gareth BALE
The captain and talisman, Bale remains the catalyst to Wales' success with his ability to change a game like no other.

COACH

Rob PAGE
Took over the job in difficult circumstances but has galvanised the squad and put his own stamp on this team.

Will injuries to key men be an issue?
The fitness of influential players like Bale, Ramsey and Allen will be crucial heading into Qatar. Niggling injuries have restricted their club involvement and the demands of competing at a major tournament will physically push them to the limit.

Dan James or Brennan Johnson?
James has been virtually an ever-present for Wales since making his senior debut in November 2018, but the emergence of Johnson has brought direct competition for the pace he delivers in attack and it is Johnson who currently has a sharper eye for goal. On current form, it is difficult to see James keeping his place despite his contribution to the side reaching Qatar.

What to do with Aaron Ramsey?
Finding the right position for Ramsey has become a conundrum. His best displays have been behind the striker in a 4-2-3-1, but coach Page appears to have settled on a 3-4-2-1 formation and Ramsey's performances in a deeper midfield role have not been to his usual high standard.

AFRICA

CAMEROON

Failing to live up to past glories

● OVERVIEW

Cameroon extended their record as the African country with the most World Cup finals appearances to eight after a dramatic last-gasp victory over Algeria.

They had lost the first leg of the March play-off at home, so their miraculous late turnaround away from home spoke to their fortitude, but this is among the weakest Cameroon sides to qualify for a World Cup since the African nation's first appearance 40 years ago.

Former captain Rigobert Song took over as coach after Cameroon finished third at the AFCON finals they hosted at the start of the year, replacing Toni Conceicao. Song owes his appointment to the fact that legend Samuel Eto'o is now Cameroon Football Federation president and will presumably have much say in team selection and tactics.

Cameroon are in a tough group and have not gotten past the group phase since their 1990 heroics when they became the first African country to reach the World Cup quarter-finals.

Mark Gleeson

Key attackers...Karl Toko Ekambi and Moumi Ngamaleu

● TACTICS

Cameroon place much emphasis on wide attackers Ngamaleu and Toko Ekambi, who complement the strength of No.9 Aboubakar. Zambo Anguissa is the key component in midfield and Ngadeu the defensive kingpin. Set-pieces are a strong point for the physically powerful unit.

STAR MAN

Andre ONANA
The goalkeeper returned from a nine-month ban last season and has just moved to Internazionale from Ajax.

COACH

Rigobert SONG
Flamboyant ex-centre-back and Cameroon captain, who played in the Premier League. His first senior coaching role.

Will they be properly prepared?

The Indomitable Lions did not timeously anticipate that AFCON 2023 qualifying group opponents Kenya would be kicked out, costing them one warm-up game in the June international window and leaving them with only Burundi and Namibia as their pre-World Cup opponents.

Who will be pulling the strings?

The first thing Samuel Eto'o did when he took over as Cameroon Football Federation president was to get rid of Portuguese coach Toni Conceicao and install his old team-mate Rigobert Song, who has limited coaching experience and might be no more than a "yes man".

Does history bare too heavy a burden for the current generation?

Memories of Italia '90 and Roger Milla's corner-flag jigs still evoke huge emotions among African football supporters. Since Cameroon reached the last eight back in 1990, they have crashed and burned at the first hurdle in all five subsequent tournaments they have qualified for.

GHANA

Upturn in fortunes for Ghanaian side in transition

● OVERVIEW

Following a disastrous outing at AFCON 2021 – which saw an embarrassing group-stage exit – and a chaotic World Cup qualifying campaign, Ghana finally seem on the right track and are primed to be among the surprise packages of the 2022 World Cup.

An experimental technical team, led by Otto Addo as head coach and Chris Hughton as technical advisor, delivered World Cup qualification after getting the better of rivals Nigeria on away goals in March's play-offs.

Finally, the Black Stars are playing with cohesion and desire, but, after being paired with Portugal, Uruguay and South Korea in Qatar, Ghana are clearly underdogs in Group H.

However, in players like Thomas Partey and Mohammed Kudus, and the potential additions of Mohammed Salisu, Callum Hudson-Odoi, Tariq Lamptey and Eddie Nketiah, Addo has at his disposal a young, talented squad that can make an impact.

Emmanuel Ayamga

Team to watch... Ghana

● TACTICS

Usually lining up in a compact 4-2-3-1 or a flexible 3-4-3, Ghana's biggest strength lies in midfield where Partey is tasked with breaking the lines and progressing play, while Kudus' creativity and knack for goals make up for the team's misfiring attacking players.

STAR MAN

Thomas PARTEY
Has struggled with injuries since joining Arsenal but remains Ghana's main man, scoring the crucial goal in the play-offs.

COACH

Otto ADDO
The ex-international arrived as interim coach in February, but his tenure has been extended after engineering WC qualification.

Back three or back four?

Ghana's defensive options will get better, especially with Salisu's imminent arrival. But that will also present a conundrum for Otto Addo, who now has to decide between a back four and a back three without comprising on the side's balance.

What is Partey's best position?

Partey's best games in a Ghana shirt have come in matches where he has been deployed further up the pitch. However, the emergence of Kudus means the team now has a natural playmaker and it remains to be seen whether Partey will play as a central midfielder or as the anchorman.

Who makes the starting XI?

Addo has a big decision to make on his starting line-up. Should Lamptey, Nketiah and Hudson-Odoi complete their national switch, the Ghana coach will be spoilt for choice on which players to start. Another dilemma is Andre Ayew. His leadership is not in doubt, but the Ghana captain is no longer the pacy winger he used to be.

MOROCCO

Atlas Lions appearing at successive finals

● OVERVIEW

Morocco won all six of their group qualifiers, although in a bizarre twist played them all at home, and then dispatched DR Congo in the play-offs.

But another poor return at the AFCON finals in January has left the side under pressure with supporters critical of coach Vahid Halilhodzic, particularly over the absence of Hakim Ziyech.

Mark Gleeson

● TACTICS

Morocco have many technically gifted players and like to play on the front foot, using the pace of their wide players and plenty of midfield skill. Achraf Hakimi is among the best right-backs in the world and now Noussair Mazraoui is back too.

Decisive in the play-off...Tarik Tissoudali

STAR MAN

Achraf HAKIMI
Flying wing-back.

COACH

Vahid HALILHODZIC
Experienced Bosnian.

Will the coach still be in the job?

Halilhodzic has the dubious distinction of qualifying two sides for the World Cup and then not going to the tournament. Ivory Coast fired him before the 2010 finals after they had done poorly at the Cup of Nations, while he was ousted as Japan boss ahead of Russia 2018.

Will Hakim Ziyech make a comeback?

So far he is refusing to sit down and work out his tiff with the coach but it would appeal to his ego – as it did before the 2018 finals when he had a similar spat with Herve Renard and the two made up – allowing Ziyech to play in Russia, albeit without any impact. Talks continue behind the scenes and dominate the agenda.

SENEGAL

Carrying the hopes of a nation

● OVERVIEW

The reigning African champions won their first-ever AFCON title in February with a penalty shootout win over Egypt – and then repeated the feat against the same side to win a place in Qatar.

It'll be their third appearance at the finals, where they made a huge impact on debut in 2002 by defeating holders France in the opening game and going on to become only the second African country to get to the quarter-finals.

Mark Gleeson

● TACTICS

Senegal have the pace and guile of Sadio Mane on the left wing as the focal point of their attack, while rampaging left-back Saliou Ciss has proven a potent force too.

Flying full-back ...Saliou Ciss

STAR MAN

Sadio MANE
Massive influence.

COACH

Aliou CISSE
Captain in 2002.

Can they carry Africa's hopes?

Senegal represent Africa's best hopes in Qatar given their recent form and the depth of their squad. As champions of the continent, they are the best of the five African representatives and should ensure there will be no repeat of the disastrous African return at Russia in 2018.

Is there another match winner?

The personality of Sadio Mane pervades through the team, but Senegal have a bevy of quality players. If there is one who can inspire, cajole and lead with his play in the way that Mane does, it is Watford attacker Ismailia Sarr, whose impact was immediately evident when he returned to the Senegal side after injury in January.

TUNISIA

Uphill struggle for the Eagles of Carthage

● OVERVIEW

Tunisia had the good fortune of some favourable draws to ensure qualification. Even then, they needed a bizarre own goal, albeit admittedly with some stout defending, to beat Mali in the play-offs.

At the AFCON finals in January, they made it to the last eight but actually lost more matches than they won, leading to the sacking of coach Mondher Kebaier.

Mark Gleeson

● TACTICS

Tunisia look for opportunities on the counter, relying on a rock-like defence and an equally stingy midfield to provide the springboard. They are exceedingly hard to break down and rarely ever expansive in their approach.

Kirin Cup... celebrating a goal v Chile

STAR MAN

Seifeddine JAZIRI
Zamalek forward.

COACH

Jalel KADRI
Appointed in 2022.

Can the North Africans get past the first round for the first time?

Tunisia were the first African country to win a match at the World Cup, when they beat Mexico in 1978, but it will be tough to advance from a group that includes Denmark and France. Their confidence will have been boosted somewhat recently though, after winning the Kirin Cup by beating Chile 2-0 and hosts Japan 3-0.

Will playing the old colonial power see them rise above their ability?

It is less of an emotive issue these days when African countries play their former colonial masters, but many in the Tunisian side are French-born and so there will be plenty of motivation.

SOUTH AMERICA

ARGENTINA

Champions of South America – the world next?

● OVERVIEW

The World Cup cannot come soon enough for Argentina. Unbeaten in the South American qualifiers, Copa America champions for the first time in 28 years and a 3-0 win over Italy in the Finalissima at Wembley – this is a side that is in form and high on confidence.

The generation that bore the burden of losing three major finals (2014 World Cup and two Copas America) has largely gone. Coach Lionel Scaloni, a surprise choice in 2018 given a total lack of coaching experience at the professional level, has rejuvenated a team that is still centered around Lionel Messi but features new stars including Lautaro Martinez, who averages a goal every other game under Scaloni.

In the process of putting together a 33-match unbeaten run that stretches back to 2019, there is a strong belief and spirit in the team and off-the-pitch camaraderie amongst the players.

Joel Richards

Julian Alvarez... Leo Messi's heir?

● TACTICS

From striker-baiting Emiliano Martinez and fierce-tackling Cristian Romero to midfield general Rodrigo De Paul and the still-unstoppable Messi, Argentina boast industry, quality and character in all lines. The structure allows Messi to operate closer to the opposition's goal.

STAR MAN

Lionel MESSI
Still the country's best player, at 35 years of age will this be captain Messi's final shot at lifting the World Cup?

COACH

Lionel SCALONI
Despite no previous club or international experience, coach Scaloni has rebuilt a new Argentina and ended a 28-year title drought.

How will Scaloni fine-tune the squad?

Scaloni largely has his starting XI decided, though Nicolas Tagliafico and Marcos Acuna still battle it out to be first-choice left-back. He will face difficult choices for the final squad – midfielders Alexis Mac Allister and Exequiel Palacios, as well as forwards Paulo Dybala, Angel Correa and Julian Alvarez are all vying for places.

Remember 2002?

Twenty years ago Argentina travelled to the World Cup as candidates for the title, only for Marcelo Bielsa's side to fall at the first hurdle in the groups. The challenge is managing the elevated expectation levels between now and November.

What next?

There is already speculation about whether Scaloni will stay on after the World Cup, which could affect things. Angel Di Maria has confirmed he will retire from the national team after the competition and Lionel Messi limited himself to saying "after the World Cup I am going to reconsider many things."

BRAZIL

Tournament favourites look like the team to beat

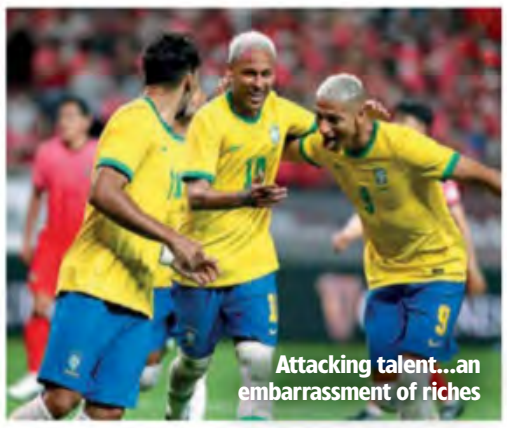
● OVERVIEW

Twenty years have gone by since Brazil last won the World Cup. Every campaign since then ended when they came up against European opposition in the knockout stages, such as 2018 when coach Tite's side fell to Belgium in the quarter-finals. It is one of just two defeats that Tite has suffered in the 42 competitive matches of his six-year reign. But both have been big ones – the other at home to Argentina in the final of last year's Copa America.

Since then, though, the team would appear to have made great strides, with the emergence, amongst others, of Vinicius Junior and Raphinha adding attacking options to a line-up which has been displaying impressive defensive solidity.

Brazil were not far off in 2018, and surely earned the right to take that Belgium match into extra-time. They look better now, and will take some stopping in Qatar.

Tim Vickery

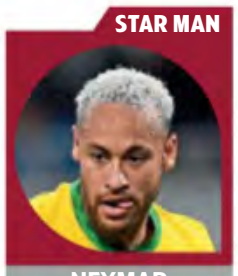


Attacking talent...an embarrassment of riches

● TACTICS

Brazil mark high, making it hard for their opponents to play out, and seek to have the bulk of possession. With the return of wingers, the full-backs are now expected to make up the extra man in midfield and appear in the attacking line as an element of surprise.

STAR MAN



NEYMAR
A huge World Cup in the career of the eternal wonderkid. Qatar 2022 will do much to define his legacy in the eyes of his compatriots.

COACH

TITE
Charismatic and competent, has won everything in his grasp with the exception of the World Cup. Surely bound for Europe?

Marquinhos plus one?

Tite almost certainly regrets dropping Marquinhos on the eve of Russia 2018. This time the Paris Saint-Germain man is a cert. But who should partner him at centre-back? The experience of Thiago Silva? Or Eder Militao, with his recovery speed? Marquinhos and Militao did not concede a goal together in qualification.

Who's the second man in midfield?

Alongside anchorman Casemiro, Fred has been doing well. But the coach would ideally like more in the final third, and the rise of Bruno Guimaraes is well timed. But there is another, bolder alternative...

Fitting in all the attacking talent...

Tite has not been able to field all his attacking players together – wingers Raphinha and Vinicius Junior, plus a centre-forward (Richarlison or Matheus Cunha), Neymar and his natural partner Lucas Paqueta. But is there room for all of them? Someone has to miss out – unless Tite trusts Paqueta enough to play him as the second man in midfield.

ECUADOR

Underestimate them at your peril

● OVERVIEW

After an excellent start on the road to Russia 2018, Ecuador imploded, beset by internal problems. Things then got worse. Bringing back Hernan Dario Gomez, who coached them to their 2002 World Cup debut, did not come off, and the flashy appointment of Jordi Cruyff turned into a farce when the Dutchman resigned before taking charge of a single game. With little time before the Qatar qualifiers, in came low-profile Argentine coach Gustavo Alfaro with even lower general expectations.

Instead, things could hardly have gone better. Alfaro has proved a fine fit, and has been bold enough to trust recent products of Ecuador's interesting youth development work. He has fashioned a team which is fast, physically strong and with flashes of talent. They reached Qatar with a round to spare, and Brazil boss Tite sees them as one of the potential surprises of the World Cup.

Tim Vickery

Ecuador's all-time record goalscorer... Enner Valencia

● TACTICS

Ecuador seek to break quickly down the flanks – opponents should certainly try to block the surges of Pervis Estupinan from left-back, which give Enner Valencia the chance to cut in and combine with Moises Caicedo. The recent introduction of Felix Torres has helped tighten up the defence.

STAR MAN

Moises CAICEDO
Alfaro threw him in as a teen and was instantly rewarded. Bestrides the midfield, wins possession and organises play.

COACH

Gustavo ALFARO
Serious looking coach, whose best work has come with smaller sides. Dovetails well with Ecuador's counter-attacking style.

The Byron Castillo case...

Chile have protested about the eligibility of right-back Byron Castillo, with the aim of replacing Ecuador at the World Cup. FIFA have dismissed the claim, but Chile may take it all the way to CAS, so, albeit remote, the chance of exclusion remains.

Who will be Ecuador's No.1?

Four keepers were used in qualification, none of them entirely convincing. 2014 World Cup veteran, the gangly Alexander Dominguez, appeared discarded at one point but now seems to be back in front of naturalised Argentine Hernan Galindez, talented but erratic youngster Moises Ramirez and the under-used Pedro Ortiz.

And on the right wing?

Alfaro has a selection dilemma between two very different left footers on the right flank. Diminutive veteran Angel Mena brings subtlety, while strapping youngster Gonzalo Plata is a powerful runner with the ball. It appears to be one or the other – Mena is favourite to start, with Plata unleashed against tiring defenders.

URUGUAY

Can ageing stars go out on a high?

● OVERVIEW

Statistically Uruguay were South America's best side in two of the last three World Cups – a remarkable recovery from a tiny nation which had seemed to resign itself to mediocrity.

Much of the credit for this goes to the long reign of former coach Oscar Washington Tabarez, who was especially successful at overseeing the work at Under-20 level. Tabarez was seduced into staying on for Qatar, where the great old strikers Edinson Cavani and Luis Suarez would still be around and the fine new midfielders would have reached maturity.

But it went wrong along the way. Injuries and an unkind run of fixtures led to a sequence of heavy defeats and, after over 15 years, a change of coach. In came Diego Alonso for the last four rounds, where, with some tweaks in personnel, Uruguay started winning again to book their place and remind everyone that they are still dangerous.

Tim Vickery

Uruguay's old guard... Godin and Suarez celebrate

● TACTICS

There are still some big decisions to be taken on how Alonso should set up his team, both in terms of personnel (how many veterans?) and in approach (whether to mark high or sit deep). They have the ability to switch systems during the game – to a back three, for example.

STAR MAN

Federico VALVERDE
Valverde has quietly established himself as the key man with his lung-busting midfield versatility.

COACH

Diego ALONSO
Ex-international striker who had spent a decade building a coaching career across the Americas when the call came.

Suarez and Cavani?

With relatively easy fixtures and a need to win, Alonso went with a 4-4-2 to get Uruguay over the line. But a consensus is growing that Suarez and Cavani together is no longer always viable and the extra midfielder plays to the team's strengths. Both veterans still have much to offer, but it looks like a case of only one in the XI – and that's not to mention Darwin Nunez.

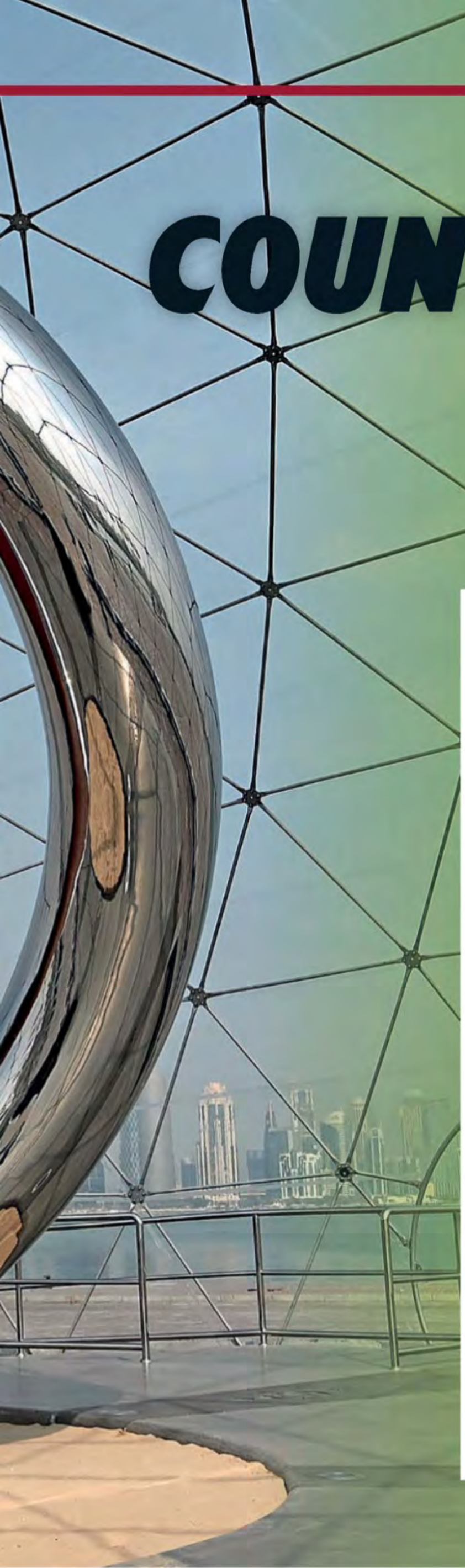
What to do with Diego Godin?

One of Alonso's first moves was to protect the captain and centre-back, now 36 and past his best, but still a vital leader. He was placed next to a defensive right-back and a holding midfielder. The alternative is to move Ronald Araujo to centre-back and play a genuine right-back. It would be a big call, but Alonso must be mulling it over.

Who should play in goal?

The experienced Fernando Muslera was injured when Alonso first took over, so the coach turned to the home-based Sergio Rochet for the end of the qualifiers. Will he stick with that decision for Qatar?

Counting down... the countdown clock for the 2022 World Cup on the Corniche



COUNTDOWN TO QATAR

John Duerden reports from the 2022 World Cup host nation

Before the global pandemic grounded the world's aircraft, almost 40 million people passed through Qatar's Hamad International Airport in 2019 (complete with Paris Saint-Germain gift shop), one of the increasingly important hubs of the aviation world. The overwhelming majority of non-Qataris were catching connecting flights to other destinations. Only around two million or so tourists actually followed the signs pointing to the immigration hall and then jumped on the newly-built metro to head to downtown Doha.

That is all going to change in November, as Qatar becomes the destination for football fans from every continent when they descend on the country for the 2022 World Cup. Nobody knows what is going to happen on the pitch when the 32 teams start to play, but there are plans that can be made when there is no football.

THE WEATHER

It goes without saying that, for the northern hemisphere, this is the first ever winter World Cup. That is going to feel strange for many who watch the 64 games at home. There are unlikely to be the massive street viewings that are common in Seoul when South Korea play, while European fans may find heading to beer gardens is not quite as attractive when temperatures are low and it's dark by early evening.

At least those who go to Qatar will enjoy some winter sunshine. The mercury is low by comparison to the summer months, which is, after all, why the event was switched from the summer. November and December temperatures in Qatar are much more palatable: usually around the mid to upper 20s during the day and late teens at night. For those coming in from colder climes, leaving behind the long nights for blue skies and sunshine is surely going to get World Cup spirits pumping.

DOHA

In truth, even the most adventurous and curious visitors are going to struggle to find different things to do in Qatar if they stay for the full month. Russia, the last host of the World Cup, covers around one-eighth of the planet's total landmass and stretches across 11 time zones. You could drive across Qatar numerous times in 11 hours with the country being roughly similar in size to the English county of Yorkshire or the US state of Connecticut. It does, however, make for a compact World Cup and the opportunity to watch more games than usual.

Much of the activity centres in and around Doha, the only major city in the country. To alleviate the heavy traffic in the city, there is a brand new, driverless, metro system with three lines and 37 stations that connect all the major destinations. It has been hailed as one of the most modern public transportation systems in the world. There are also a number of new roads. There can still be plenty of traffic during rush hour but it is much easier to get around Qatar now compared to when it was awarded the tournament back in 2010.

Doha is a modern city and regional hub with gleaming skyscrapers that

Modern...Doha's metro system

can be seen for miles around but those looking for a taste of ancient Arabic history or culture may be a little disappointed. The Wafiq Souq, restored and renovated in 2000, is worth a visit for those who like to shop, though finding bargains takes time and patience. The Museum of Islamic Art is a delight in terms of building design and exhibits and can be found on the Corniche, a waterfront promenade that stretches for around four miles where all visitors end up sooner or later.

People often gather to walk, run, skate or just hang out in the shadow of numerous skyscrapers. It can be especially pleasant early in the morning or when the sun sets. There are beaches too, both public and those that belong to the five-star international hotels that can be found in the area.

For those who fancy a beer or two, outside of the FIFA fanfests and their bottles of Budweiser, these hotels are usually the destination of choice. As you would expect, it is not cheap to down pints in such places but most offer happy hours with prices that are a little more palatable, though it remains to be seen what will happen during the World Cup.

VENTURING OUT

For those who grow bored of the big city, there are two main options outside: the desert and the sea. The former has long been a playground for locals and expats and those passing through. Drives over the dunes are on the list of most and there are plenty of options. 4x4 jeeps take you out of the city, the drivers then let air out of their tyres to give more traction on the sand. It is a thrilling and bumpy ride. One popular port of call is the Inland Sea which borders Saudi Arabia, after some serious desert driving, you can then enjoy a dip.

Not all tours involve "dune-bashing" in which drivers compete to see how close they can come to almost turning over their jeeps. There are possibilities for more sedate camel rides and dinner in the dunes under the unforgettable night sky.

> You could drive across Qatar numerous times in 11 hours with the country being roughly similar in size to the English county of Yorkshire or the US state of Connecticut

Looking further afield, this has been hailed by FIFA as the first World Cup in the Middle East and there are fascinating destinations within easy reach of Qatar. Many who have this idea will likely head to the big and bright cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates but there are other places that will offer a greater contrast to Doha.

For a taste of a more traditional Arabic cultural experience, a trip to Oman is recommended. With the locals among the friendliest in the region, beautiful old buildings and monuments, and not to mention some great beaches, it makes a perfect side trip to the big event. Jordan has the delights of Petra and the Dead Sea. To see how the competition is viewed elsewhere in the region would be a memorable experience and for the more adventurous visitors, Iran is hoping to attract tourists who struggle to find accommodation in Qatar to its southern beaches.

Doha...the official World Cup ball hangs over Qatar's capital city

Flagship venue.... Lusail Stadium

The stadiums

Eight stadiums will be used for the finals, all within a 21-mile radius of Doha

AL BAYT STADIUM

Let's start at the northern edges of the tournament with the impressive stadium at Al Khor, a 40-minute drive from the capital. This 60,000-seater arena is the second biggest in the World Cup with a retractable roof and a design meant to resemble a traditional Arab tent. It will host nine games in total, including a semi-final and Qatar's first-ever appearance on the global stage against Ecuador on November 21, as well as the eagerly-awaited Group E clash between European heavyweights Germany and Spain.

LUSAIL STADIUM

Not far to the south of Al Khor is the flagship venue, completed behind schedule but completed nonetheless. A few miles north of the capital, most of the 80,000 seats in the arena, the design of which was based on Middle East art, will be dismantled after it hosts the final and then given to developing countries. Brazil and Argentina will start their campaigns here against Serbia and Saudi Arabia respectively.

EDUCATION CITY STADIUM

Unsurprisingly, given its name, this ground is surrounded by universities in Al Rayyan. The geometrically-designed venue known as the "Diamond in the Desert" has already been well-used in tournaments such as the Arab Cup with supporters enjoying the action close to the pitch. Half of its 40,000 seats will be sent elsewhere once the World Cup ends but it all starts with Denmark and Tunisia in Group D.

AHMAD BIN ALI STADIUM

Formally known as the Al Rayyan Stadium after the team, formerly dominant in Qatar, who have long played there. This 40,000-seater arena has been rebuilt and will, like most of the others, be reduced in capacity later. Its design is meant to resemble sand dunes, the beauty of the desert and native flora and fauna. Seven games will take place here, including three in Group B, featuring England, Iran, USA and Wales.

KHALIFA INTERNATIONAL STADIUM

All the big sporting events used to be staged in this arena that was first opened in 1976 but has now been renovated. A part of the city's landscape with the distinctive Torch hotel next door, it has played host to some big games but nothing like the World Cup and the first will be England's clash with Iran. It will also stage the third-place play-off.

AL THUMAMA STADIUM

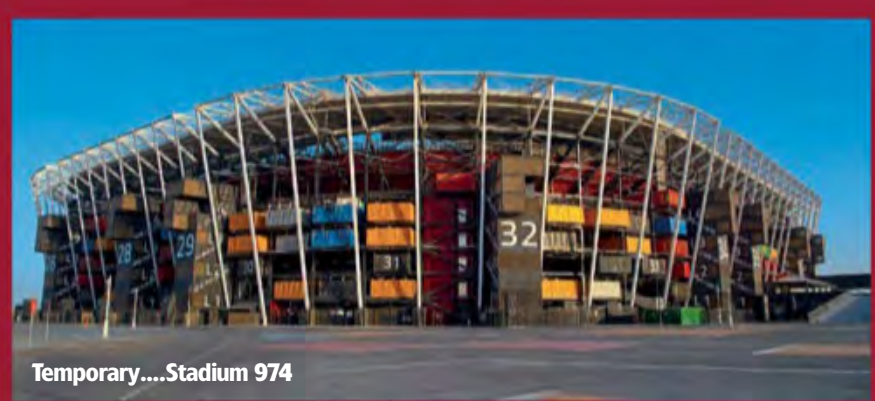
Located south of Doha, this eye-catching arena that is designed to look like the *gahfiya*, traditional Arabic headwear, will host the first game of the competition when Senegal take on the Netherlands.

STADIUM 974

Formerly known as the Ras Abu Aboud Stadium, this arena is made up of 974 shipping containers (that number is also Qatar's international country telephone code) and is a temporary venue that will be fully dismantled after the party leaves town. The party begins with Mexico taking on Poland and ends with a game in the round of 16.

AL JANOUB STADIUM

This futuristic-looking stadium, with its sleek design that was inspired by the dhow boats that can be seen off the country's coastline, also has a retractable roof. It will be home to Al Wakrah Sports Club with a reduced 20,000 capacity. France begin their title defence here.



Temporary....Stadium 974

Futuristic....Al Janoub

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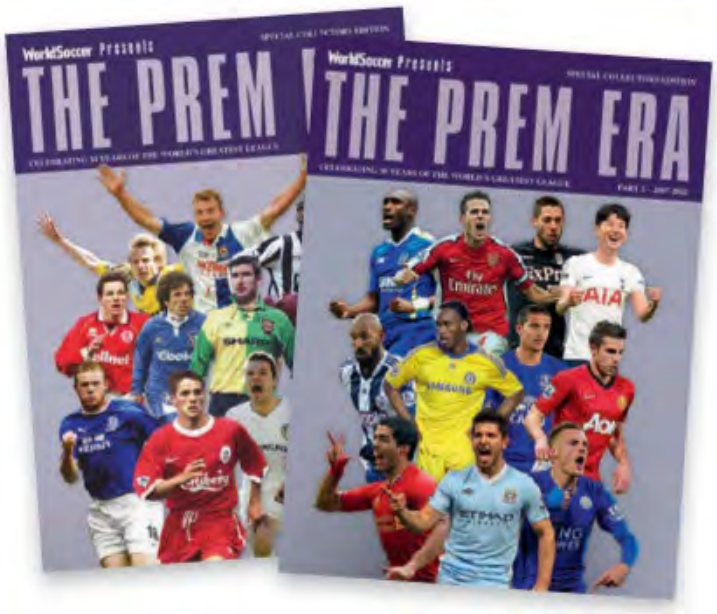

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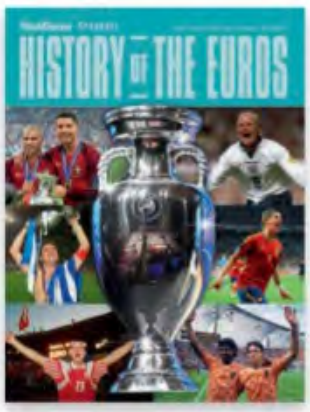

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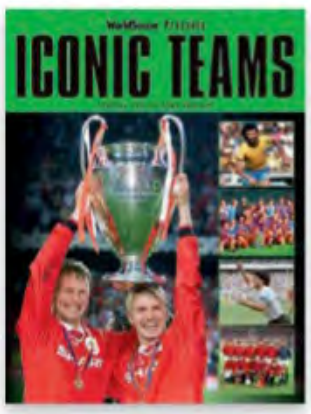

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EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

One year on from the introduction of the Europa Conference League, Steve Menary assesses the merits of UEFA's new competition

When the notion of a third UEFA club competition was first floated a few years ago, the idea of a final between two Eastern European clubs whose best days were decades ago was a frequent criticism.

Instead, four clubs with long and strong track records from England, France, Italy and the Netherlands made the semi-finals, with Roma beating Feyenoord 1-0 to win the inaugural trophy in the Albanian capital of Tirana on May 25.

"People were against it because UEFA were working on the format before it was launched," says Olivier Jarosz, former head of club services at the European Club Association and now an independent consultant at LTT Sports.

"One of the issues was, should you let the big five leagues [England, France, Italy, Germany and Spain] in, but if you don't let them in then it becomes a league of the poor and that's not very attractive commercially. Now it's here, people are satisfied and I can't imagine UEFA without it."

The competition is very much third rate in terms of finance, but has paid out more money to more clubs, which was UEFA's aim.

UEFA will distribute €2.7 billion to clubs in the Champions League and Super Cup, €465 million to participants in the Europa League and €235m to sides in the Conference League. There were 32 clubs from 26 of UEFA's 55 member associations that qualified for the Conference League group stage.

The Netherlands had three clubs in the groups – AZ, Feyenoord and Vitesse – but only four other countries had more than one club. Eight clubs made their debut appearances in the group stage of a UEFA competition: Alashkert (Armenia), Bodo/Glimt (Norway), Flora (Estonia), Kairat (Kazakhstan), Lincoln Red Imps (Gibraltar), Mura (Slovenia), Randers (Denmark) and Union Berlin (Germany).

In countries with strong domestic leagues, particularly Germany, the Conference League might seem like a weak alternative to the Champions League or the Europa League, but Alashkert, Flora and Lincoln Red Imps were the first teams from their leagues to ever play in a UEFA competition group stage.

Dylan Viagas, president of Lincoln Red Imps, says: "It's put us on the map. Our product has grown and financially it has helped us enormously. We can invest in our youth again and are buying a property to build a clubhouse. It's been massive for us.

"Most clubs in Gibraltar have their own social clubs, but we are looking to build something with a restaurant with catering facilities and accommodation for the players. That will cost us in the region of £1m."

Lincoln Red Imps would have earned money from simply playing in the first qualifying round of the Champions League, but under UEFA's rules had to forgo that after qualifying for the Conference League group stage.

Gibraltar has a price-sharing agreement to help keep the league competitive and that Champions

League payment would have been shared. With Lincoln Red Imps instead earning €2.94m from qualifying for the Conference League group stage, the club paid €260,000 into the pot to be shared with other clubs. "It's important for Gibraltar football to be sustainable," adds Mr Viagas.

For clubs in some of UEFA's middle-ranking leagues, the Conference League represented a step down compared to previous exploits, and that was initially reflected in both expectations and also early media coverage of the tournament.

In 2011-12, Cypriot champions APOEL qualified from a Champions League group that included Porto, Shakhtar Donetsk and Zenit, then beat to Lyon to reach the quarter-finals. That was a pinnacle for Cypriot football, but the country has had one or two clubs in the Champions League or Europa League group stage in all but one season since 2008.

This season, Anorthosis Famagusta and Omonia Nicosia both stumbled in the qualifying rounds of the Europa League and had to settle for the Conference League but Cypriot football has come round to the benefits of the new competition.

Devastated... Feyenoord's Cyriel Dessers after the final defeat to Roma

Big impression... Bodo/Glimt were one of the main clubs to enjoy their first taste of European competition

Erodotos Miltiadous, president of the Cyprus Sports Writers Union, says: "The Conference League groups were initially not seen as something great. But after Omonia and Anorthosis saw the high level of opponents, we all came round to accept it as a good thing, especially for small countries like ours."

Anorthosis finished a close third behind Belgian side Gent and Partizan Belgrade of Serbia in Group B, while Omonia lost just two games and finished in the same spot in Group H that included Swiss giants Basel. "As [Cyprus are now] 15th in the UEFA ranking, our champion and cup winner are guaranteed a UECL spot in the worst case, which has excited us," adds Miltiadous.

In smaller countries, where qualifying for the group stage often seems almost unattainable, such as Luxembourg, there are also attractions to the new tournament. However, with a smaller playing base, past achievements can weigh heavy.

In 2018-19, F91 Dudelange became the first club from Luxembourg to qualify for the group stage of the Europa League. Tickets for the group games with Milan, Real Betis and Olympiakos sold out in hours. Dudelange repeated the feat a season later and even won a game, beating APOEL of Cyprus, but no club from the Grand Duchy has come close to qualifying since.

Dudelange's exploits were fuelled by the financial backing of owner Flavio Becca. With Gerard Lopez bankrolling

Fola Esch, the standard of the BGL Ligue was high. Progres Niederkorn even knocked out this year's Europa League finalists Rangers from the competition in 2017.

Top players subsequently earned moves abroad such as Dudelange's Danel Sinani, who moved to Norwich City in England, and Sebastien Thill from Progres to Sheriff Tiraspol in Moldova. With Becca and Lopez withdrawing and top players gone, the standard of the league is weaker and qualification for the Conference League group stage is now difficult.

For clubs from smaller countries to mount a consistent challenge for places in the Conference League group stage, there needs to be a strong playing base and investment but even appearing in the qualifiers can be a financial fillip.

On average, clubs in Luxembourg have annual revenue of around €1m. In 2020-21, champions Fola Esch were drubbed 7-2 on aggregate by Lincoln Red Imps but still got €300,000 from UEFA in 2021-22 and then dropped into the second qualifying round of the Conference League.

A special Champions Path keeps smaller champions away from bigger sides in the early Conference League qualifiers. Fola beat Northern Irish side Linfield and Shakhtyor Soligorsk of Belarus to reach the play-offs, where they lost to Kairat but still earned €750,000. Even with the cost of travelling and staging home games, that is a major budget boost.

> "It's put us on the map. Our product has grown and financially it has helped us enormously. We can invest in our youth again and are buying a property to build a clubhouse. It's been massive for us"
>
> **Dylan Viagas, president of Lincoln Red Imps**

Sharing the wealth...Lincoln Red Imps of Gibraltar

The problem for the smaller sides is that just as the benefits of the Conference League are becoming apparent, the tournament, along with the Champions and Europa League, is being changed by UEFA from 2024 to the new Swiss tournament. In UEFA's two main competitions, there will be eight matchdays but only six in the Conference League.

Here is the problem in UEFA's attempts to help smaller clubs and sides from Eastern Europe, many of whose competitiveness collapsed with the end of the Soviet Union and the break-up of Yugoslavia.

In the Conference League, clubs play matches that they can win and improve their coefficient in UEFA's ranking, which can boost their access to continental club competitions in places like Cyprus. That obvious bonus is offset by less money from fewer matchdays, which will only increase the financial gap between clubs.

"There will be an imbalance between revenue and coefficient so maybe [UEFA] need to think about that," adds Olivier Jarosz. "The Conference League is not a financial panacea for clubs like Roma. It is for the Eastern European clubs. It's always a worry when people think it will only be smaller clubs but then people also complain about the access list to let big clubs in. That's the paradox."

In 2022-23, richer clubs from the big leagues – particularly the Big Five – will have deep enough squads to cope with half a dozen matches against sides from weaker leagues. With €3m just for reaching the group stage and performance-based bonuses, clubs from middle-ranking leagues may choose to prioritise the Conference League but will then risk damaging their domestic prospects and a return to Europe the following season.

The Conference clearly has benefits but also provides yet another safety net for clubs from the bigger leagues, which look set to continue to dominate the final stages of the new competition.

Electric atmospheres... Fans of PAOK turned out for the quarter-final

ASIAN SUPER LEAGUE

First it was touted in Europe, then in Africa. Now, it's Asia's turn to consider forming its own "Super League"

Words: John Duerden

Plans to establish a European Super League were made public in April 2021 and blew up to become a huge story in football, business and politics. The short-lived saga was watched around the world. Anger from fans, media and other stakeholders helped to put paid to the new project, temporarily at least. Asian football would kill for such an outcry, such passion and interest. When, almost a year later, the first whispers of a possible Asian Super League were heard, the reaction was much more low-key.

It started with a press release from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) that dropped in journalists' inboxes from Jeddah to Jakarta. More details started to emerge but still not enough to provoke the kind of response seen to the west. Twas ever thus. A lack of passion in Asia when it comes to Asian club football has been a chronic problem – some countries don't even broadcast continental finals if their teams are not involved. New ideas then are always welcome but more information is going to be needed if there is to be any sense whether this one is any good.

What we know for sure is that, on March 30, the AFC announced that its executive committee had met in Qatar under the watchful eye of president Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa and that improving the standards of club competition on the continent had been on the agenda. At the moment, there are two major continental-wide club competitions: the AFC Champions League, open to around half of Asia's member federations, and the AFC Cup, a second-tier tournament, more for developing nations.

"I am pleased to announce that we will set up the Elite Club Competition Task Force, which will be responsible for establishing the ways in which we can transform our elite club football into a more attractive stage to improve technical performance, drive commercial value and excite investors to elevate our club competitions to the next level," Salman, who announced in May that he is seeking re-election to serve a third term, said. The AFC also said that this task force, which would look into transforming elite football, would be made up of representatives from the following federations: Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Uzbekistan and the United Arab Emirates. It soon emerged that these are likely to be the nations whose clubs would earn a straight ticket into a future Asian Super League. Iran are entitled to wonder what is going on.

Football Federation Australia boss

AFC Champions League...could Asia's premier club tournament soon be replaced?

James Johnson talked openly about being involved in conversations. "I don't think it's anything people should be worried about; they should see it as an opportunity to ensure that competitions continue to grow. Because the reality is if they don't grow, they fall behind," he said. "It's important for Australia to be a driver of those conversations. It's good that we'll be represented, and it's good for Asia that we'll be represented as well because we're an important market for Asia."

Johnson stressed that it was still very early days. "We need to go in and listen, and try to understand more about what AFC's objectives are, but also I think we can bring a very sophisticated voice to the table. I think we're an organisation and a country that is well respected in Asia and we'll be going in there listening, but we'll be also talking as well. We've first got to find out what the terms of reference are."

This kind of wait-and-see position is a common one. It has been suggested that this new Super League – a name that the AFC has been keen to avoid – would contain 24 teams and could even start as early as 2024-25. With the aforementioned octet of countries getting two automatic spots each, there would be space for eight other nations to have one representative in this new creation.

Kings of Asia... Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia won the Asian Champions League in November

West v East...in the AFC Champions League, the two zones don't meet until the final

On the pitch, Europe's major tournament is hugely successful and popular around the world. The Asian Champions League was designed to emulate that tournament and came into existence in 2003 to succeed the Asian Club Championship. The competition's journey ever since has been up and down but high points tend to come on the back of the popularity of individual clubs. The emergence of big-spending Chinese teams a decade ago was a boost and brought stars and big crowds, especially welcome as South Korean and Japanese clubs sometimes seemed indifferent to the competition – at least until their teams reached the pointy end. In the west, Saudi Arabian clubs started to climb back to the top and Iran were always interested but the sight of half-empty, at best, stadiums in many parts became too common.

Off the pitch, it is obvious that success in Asia is not a game changer financially. At the moment, the Asian Champions League is small fry compared to what happens in the west. If you win all six group games in Europe then you will collect €16.8 million. Such a perfect record further east would net €285,000. Getting to the quarter-finals in Asia brings around €140,000, not much more than one per cent of what the equivalent last-eight reaching teams in Europe receive. With those rewards, coupled with the time and stress involved in travelling around Asia, especially earlier in the competition, then it is perhaps understandable that some clubs don't give the tournament the attention it deserves.

Bringing in more teams from more countries was seen as a way to help improve profile and increase markets. The tournament started with 16 teams in 2003 and expanded to 32 six years later. It was still seen as too restrictive in terms of the countries that were allowed to enter clubs. For years a tiny nation such as Qatar, with a population of three million, had more teams in the competition than the entire football mad region of Southeast Asia with 650 million spread across countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. That has changed with the group stage of the 2022 tournament featuring 40 teams from 21 countries with the likes of India, Turkmenistan, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Tajikistan all featuring.

COVID has set the Champions League back however, making everything more expensive and time-consuming, especially for those in the eastern zone with much greater distances and, often, stricter travel restrictions. It has also exacerbated

AFC president... Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa

It has been suggested that this new Super League – a name that the AFC has been keen to avoid – would contain 24 teams and could even start as early as 2024-25

another of the tournament's weaknesses. It is understandable that it has been split geographically as it was just too large to have teams whizzing from one end to the other to play group stage matches. Eastern clubs could play western rivals from the quarter-final onwards but that was changed after 2013 so the two zones now mix only in the final. This has led to a sense that there are almost two separate tournaments with one side having little interest in the other until the last match. It has been made worse by the pandemic with intensive group stages taking place in local hubs and the games in each zone taking place in different months. The second round of the 2022 tournament will kick off in August in the east but next February for the west. This year's group stage went almost unnoticed in some parts of the continent.

There is also the prospect of big Asian nations having less involvement. In 2021 Australian teams withdrew due to the pandemic. In 2022, two Chinese clubs did the same while two others sent youth teams and were thrashed. That not only harms the tournament but also has repercussions moving forward. Federations are allocated berths in future competitions based on a coefficient ranking – win games and your coefficient increases. Australia had a poor past record anyway and with no teams last year, the country's coefficient has slipped below Hong Kong and the Philippines. China's will also drop and there is the prospect of top nations having limited representation in future editions.

European executives would recognise some of the same concerns about whether the big teams from the big nations would always feature. The prospect of countries such as China and Australia falling so low in the rankings that their clubs participate in the second-tier AFC Cup more than the Champions League is not a welcome one for many officials. A Super League with its guaranteed allocation would put an end to all that. If rumours that the prize money could increase by four times are accurate, then clubs really will start to take more notice.

Obviously, money is involved. Talk to AFC officials and they say that the driving force behind the proposals are coming from commercial partners. This new idea may not be the answer but any discussion of the future of club football on the continent is welcome. A different format is unlikely however to solve the fundamental weakness of Asian club football: most Asian football fans are just not that interested in Asian football, at least at the club level. It still remains unlikely that supporters in Japan or South Korea would tune in to watch a game between clubs from the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan and vice versa. A Super League would have to be very super indeed to change all that.

In conversations... Football Federation Australia CEO James Johnson

ADIL NABI

"I didn't get a fair chance in England – one day I would like to play in the Premier League"

Nabi's career has already taken him from Birmingham to India, to Greece, via spells in the Football League and Scotland. The 28-year-old reflects on his nomadic career, and looks to the future with new club Atromitos

To begin with, how does a young lad from Birmingham end up playing professional football in Greece?
It isn't the first time I've played football away from home. I like to venture out after starting off in England, then playing in India, Scotland and now in Greece. You experience different lifestyles and different styles of football and meet new people. I am always up for a challenge.

Georgios Samaras was a team-mate of mine at West Brom and he became the vice-president of Super League side OFI Crete so that is how the initial move to Greece came about.

Now you're at a club called Atromitos...
I had to think about the move but as soon as I knew the manager wanted me and how big the club is from a footballing aspect it was made easier. I was sad to leave OFI because I have a strong connection with the people at the club, the fans and on the island.

How big a factor was manager Chris Coleman in your move to Atromitos?
It was pretty massive because being from the UK with a huge profile he doesn't need any introduction. It was a great opportunity for myself, and to be wanted by someone like him spoke for itself. I wanted to go and play for him and long may it continue.

What is the lifestyle like in Greece?
It is fantastic. I have moved to the mainland in Athens so it is a city like Birmingham and similar to being at home. The country has everything we have over in Britain so you don't feel any homesickness. Family can visit with direct flights and you can even take a trip to IKEA for the new apartment, which makes it feel like being back at home! Some people don't have the same experiences playing abroad but for me it has been good.

Have you ever faced any form of discrimination while living over there?
Nothing at all, never. Absolutely zero instances of that. Everyone has been so welcoming which is pleasing. I feel 100 per cent safe here and I have no worries. My family is out here too and there are no issues.

Being a Muslim, what about the availability of provisions such as Halal food?
There is a huge Muslim population in Athens ➤

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Delhi Dynamos team-mate...Roberto Carlos

so access to Halal butchers and restaurants is so much easier than on an island like Crete. There are mosques everywhere so it is great. Going in and out for prayers, you get to meet a lot of new people and there are other Muslim footballers from different teams who attend too.

[Morocco international] Youssef El-Arabi and [Guinea midfielder] Mady Camara are both currently at champions Olympiakos, and there's [former Watford player] Nordin Amrabat at AEK Athens. There have previously been plenty of Muslim players in the Greek Super League so following our religion here is comfortable for us.

Do you think you got enough opportunities to play in Britain?
No, I didn't get a fair chance in England. Since I have been away, my ultimate aim has been to get back playing at home. One day I would like to play in the Premier League or the Championship. I genuinely believe I can play in the top flight without a doubt, and now I am more prepared and ready to be a regular in the first team and have the same impact I have had in Greece.

Have you had any offers to come back to England since playing abroad?
I have been very close to coming back a few times. Then I suffered an injury and I have only just returned to action recently. I am getting stronger and fitter and enjoying getting back to playing regularly again. Hopefully sooner rather than later I will have the opportunity to fulfil my potential.

Starting out... Nabi in action for West Brom's youth team

Tell us about your stint in India in 2015 with Delhi Dynamos.
Having the opportunity to play with the likes of Roberto Carlos, Florent Malouda and John Arne Riise was huge. They are all footballing legends and have all won the Champions League. Playing with Roberto Carlos was something I will live with forever – I can relay that story until I leave this planet! It was a great experience being around him and speaking to him. What he taught me is something I can take forward and help future generations with as well. You would think he would keep himself to himself, but he was fantastic with me and we spent long evenings chatting about football and socialising. I can't speak highly enough of him.

Having played in Asia and coming from an Asian background, why do you think there are so few British Asian footballers?
All we can do is keep trying, keep pushing the families and parents to get their children playing football. Hopefully a lot more can be done by organisations and footballing bodies. If people like myself can help then I am more than happy to do that. I had full backing from my parents and family and managed to make a career and life out of it. It shows it can be possible for other people as well.

Delhi Dynamos... Nabi spent a year on loan with the Indian Super League side

OFI...Nabi spent three years with the Crete-based club

"Playing with Roberto Carlos was something I will live with forever – I can relay that story until I leave this planet"

Do you see yourself as a role model for Asian kids growing up?
Not just for Asian kids but I would like to be a role model for kids on the streets. I am from Aston in Birmingham which is seen as a rough area and I want people to see that you can come from an area like mine, with a British-Pakistani background, and you can make opportunities for yourself if you work hard. You have to grab it with both hands and break the ceiling. If I can give motivation and inspiration to kids then I would be happy.

Is going to play abroad because of a lack of first-team opportunities something you would recommend?
Yes, definitely. If you are not getting the opportunities because of a manager's philosophy – he might not even like you or the way you play – or because of politics at the club, if you have a chance to go abroad you should go for it. The things you will learn with different cultures, you might end up finding your happy place. Your performance levels might increase and then your mentality changes. You will be happy playing, so come out of your comfort zone and go for it.

Do you have any regrets?
I wish I had an opportunity at West Brom. Apart from that, no regrets. I have done my best with the opportunities I have been given elsewhere, which I am grateful for. Now I have new targets, where I want to play in the big leagues again. I still look out for West Brom's results because they are the team I grew up with and where I started off at the age of six. It is somewhere I would like to go back and play.

Interview by Shamoon Hafez

New boss...Chris Coleman embraces Nabi

IVAYLO PETEV

"We laid a very good foundation for the future"

The Bosnia-Herzegovina coach sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his career

As a player of Litex Lovech you won two league titles in 1998 and 1999 and one cup in 2001. How do you assess this period?
It was a great period for Litex, who became the first team from the province to win two league titles in a row after Vladislav Varna back in 1925 and 1926. The team entered the First Division and immediately became champions, which was a big success for our small city Lovech. I am happy to be a part of it. When we won our first title, unfortunately, I was injured and only took part in a few matches, but I was a regular the next year. Those were my best years as a player.

After you finished playing in 2010 you immediately became head coach of Ludogorets. What attracted you to this position?
In 2010 I was still 35, but two years earlier I began to study and soon I received a coaching licence. The situation was delicate, because I had to immediately accept the offer of the Ludogorets president Aleksandar Aleksandrov. The team was in the Third Division, we began to prepare, but Minyor Radnevo refused to take part for financial reasons, which is why Ludogorets entered the Second Division.

So began the "Ludogorets project" and my coaching career. The aim was to have a good team and to attempt to finish in mid-table. But after six or seven rounds the priorities changed and we decided to make a lot of signings in the winter window. At the end of the season we managed to achieve promotion to the First Division.

At that time you can't have imagined that Ludogorets would become so dominant in Bulgarian football...
Of course, nobody thought that would be possible. But during that first year we laid the foundations of a successful future project.

In your first season in the top flight you achieved something unique for Bulgaria – winning the league, cup and super cup.
Look, this doesn't happen every day, or every year. I was very happy to be a part of this new project. The reason for this success was that the players, the coaching staff and the club's board all looked in one direction. For me, it was a great start to my coaching career.

In 2013 you were unveiled as manager of Levski Sofia, but ultras attacked and undressed you during the presentation and you stepped down. Do you ever think about what would have been if you'd taken charge of Levski?
Nobody can say what would have happened. But, what I can say, is that as coach of Levski I would have shown my best qualities.

Why did you leave the Bulgarian national team in 2016? Was the offer from Dinamo Zagreb too attractive?
It was the third offer from Dinamo and maybe the last. That is why I decided to move.

Was it difficult working at Dinamo? What was it like working under [former club director] Zdravko Mamic?
He is an exceptionally erudite person in football. When Croatia were runners-up at the 2018 World Cup, 14 or 15 of their players started their careers at Dinamo under Mamic. He was enormously successful in creating and selling players – the results speak for themselves. I learned a lot from him. I worked excellently with him. Now we are friends and we have a respect for each other. His valuation of me as a coach is very important.

Is it hard to work at Dinamo? This is a team that has to win every single match. But that is my aim too, and that's why it was a pleasure for me to work at Dinamo.

How difficult is it to take charge of Bosnia-Herzegovina following iconic names such as Safet Susic and Dusan Bajevic?
This is a great challenge for me. The main reason I took charge was the players. Now I am happy to work with stars of European football like Edin Dzeko, Miralem Pjanic, Sead Kolasinac and Rade Krunic.

I am very satisfied to work with them. They help the team a lot and are real leaders on and off the pitch. They are professionals, not spoilt stars. They are big personalities and good boys, who are helping the young players to develop and to be the future of the team. I don't need to speak about their football qualities – the whole of Europe knows who they are. They are behind me to reach our next aims.

There is an excellent atmosphere and we have very good relationships between us.

How have you been treated by the local media since taking charge?
The foreigner is always a foreigner. If you are not in your country it is something different. But after a few months the people learn to value your qualities. I know what I can do and I have earned respect.

January marked your first year in Bosnia. How do you reflect on that period?
In the World Cup qualifiers we laid a very good foundation for the future. The local journalists say that, for the first time, there is an organisation and discipline in the team. In the decisive match against Finland, where we were without Edin Dzeko, we made silly mistakes, which unfortunately cost us our chances of qualifying. But I am optimistic that we will continue to get better.

In Bosnia, unfortunately, no club qualified for the group stage of the Champions League, Europa League or Europa Conference League.

After failing to qualify for the World Cup, what are your next ambitions?
We have ambitions for success in the UEFA Nations League. And after that we would like to qualify for Euro 2024 in Germany.

Interview by Rumen Paytashev

Words Nick Bidwell

Mathys TEL

Rennes

In a sentence
Tremendously versatile frontrunner, the skipper of France's victorious Under-17s has been scaling the football ladder at a remarkable lick in recent times.

What they say
"I noticed scouts representing Atalanta and Internazionale, and some from Manchester and Germany too. There was a sort of euphoria around Mathys"
Thomas Berlette, Tel's former youth coach

"From the moment I came into contact with him, I felt he had that extra something. His touch on the ball, the ease with which he played"
Eric Campaner, his coach at first club Villiers-le-Bel

The story so far
Born and brought up in Sarcelles, a northern suburb of Paris. Joined his first club, Villiers-le-Bel, at the age of seven. Later turned out for schoolboy sides at Paris FC and Jeunesse Aubervilliers, often operating in central defence. Considered one of the best prospects in Paris, he was good enough to earn a place at the French national academy, INF Clairefontaine, but for reasons unknown, was subsequently cut.

Aged 13, he moved to Montrouge, whose coaches thought his skills and pace would be much better deployed on the left-side of attack. Performed so impressively there that top-flight Rennes came calling, persuading him to sign a "first option" agreement in January 2018. Inducted into Rennes' prolific academy 18 months later (aged 15). Several years younger than team-mates and opponents, he was soon excelling for Rennes' reserves in a new midfield role. Also earned rave reviews for a brilliant display in a UEFA Youth League defeat versus Italian side Internazionale in 2020-21.

> "There was a sort of euphoria around Mathys"
> Thomas Berlette, Tel's former youth coach

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TEL

- Rennes faced a lot of competition for his signature, with the likes of Barcelona, RB Leipzig and Monaco all reportedly looking to snare him.
- Growing up, his idol was France legend Thierry Henry, another native of Greater Paris.
- He replaced midfielder Eduardo Camavinga (now with Real Madrid) as Rennes' youngest-ever first-team player, breaking the latter's mark by a month and nine days.

Made his senior debut for the club in August 2021, coming off the bench five minutes from the end of a Breton derby against Brest. Now the club's youngest-ever player (16 years, three months and 19 days). Last season, he made seven first-team appearances for Rennes, all of them off the bench. Has won caps for France's Under-17s and Under-18s, and regularly on the scoresheet.

The next step
Under contract with Rennes until June 2024, the youngster will, according to his agent, be patient in his career development, keen above all else to establish himself in the Rennes first team. He's a level-headed kid with his feet on the ground, so will not rush to flee abroad.

Strengths
Lightning quick, dynamic, athletic, perfectly two-footed, highly creative and can be devastating in one-on-one situations. Packs a powerful, accurate shot and can more than hold his own aerially. Can play anywhere in the front-line or in the midfield.

Weaknesses
On a tactical level, he inevitably has a way to go, notably in his reading of the game and decision-making.

Tom BISCHOF

Hoffenheim
It speaks volumes that all of the biggest clubs in the Bundesliga (Bayern Munich, Dortmund and RB Leipzig) have been beating a path to the door of the Hoffenheim goalscoring midfielder. A lightweight in stature but smooth as silk when using the ball. Recently extended his deal with Hoffenheim until 2025.

Iker BRAVO

B. Leverkusen
Outstanding young striker, who can put the ball in the net with either foot and is strong in the air too. Intelligent, skilful, mobile and has a flair for the spectacular, with overhead kicks a particular speciality. Joined Bundesliga outfit Leverkusen from the Barcelona academy last year – a switch that shocked many in the Catalan city.

Dario ESSUGO

Sporting
This combative, resourceful and energetic defensive midfielder arguably scored the goal of the tournament in the semi-final loss to France, rifling home an unstoppable howitzer from long distance. Of Angolan lineage, he has been honing his craft at the Sporting academy since the age of nine.

Dean HUIJSEN

Juventus
The towering 17-year-old Juventus centre-back is the personification of studied cool, unflappable in even the most threatening of circumstances. Quick to spot danger and an outstanding blocker of shots, while also technically assured enough to be the *Oranje's* penalty-taker. Grew up in Spain, beginning his football journey at Malaga's academy. Big future.

Stanis IDUMBO-MUZAMBO

Ajax
Ajax, one of the world's top talent factories, do not tend to recruit duds and certainly did not miscalculate when bringing in this five-star attacking midfielder from Gent last year. Born in France to Congolese parents, he is a dribbling virtuoso, almost impossible to dispossess when in full flow. Scored twice for the Belgians as they crashed out of their group in Israel.

Jardell KANGA

Bayer Leverkusen
At home in various positions – second striker, number ten, right-winger – the Leverkusen youth-teamer is an absolute jewel. He combines 20/20 vision, speed, imagination and no little end goalscoring ability – as he proved with his four goals in Israel, netting in all three of Sweden's group games as they unlucky went out on goal difference. Very dangerous when running at defenders from deep.

Luca LIPANI

Genoa
The *Azzurri*'s influential central midfielder and captain has a lot of strings to his bow: elegance, a great range of passing, dead-ball ability, tactical smarts, a pronounced work ethic and a powerful shot. Very strong in bringing tempo changes and vertical incisiveness to his side's approach play. Currently plays for the youth team of hometown club Genoa.

Jovan MILOSEVIC

Vojvodina
Serbia's progress to the last four, before defeat to the Netherlands on penalties, was largely fuelled by the wonderfully composed finishing of the Vojvodina centre-forward. He netted in each of his team's five matches in Israel, eventually claiming the Golden Boot as the tournament's top scorer with five goals. Impressive in his hold-up play and work in the channels, he has been attracting interest from abroad.

Glenn Moore

Rangers buck European trend with title win

Blue Belles win the Scottish title for the first time, while the rest of Europe's league champions either retain or regain their titles

With 55 men's league titles to their name, Glasgow giants Rangers are solely eclipsed by Northern Ireland's Linfield, and that only since the latter's latest title in May.

In the women's game, however, they are finally celebrating their first after ending a 14-season run of success for Glasgow City.

It was the first fruit of the Old Firm's new interest in the women's game, one which is likely to lead to a new era in Scottish women's football, although City – an independent women's club – managed to stay ahead of Celtic to take second place, and a Champions League qualifying spot.

However, Celtic won both domestic cups, beating City after extra-time in the Scottish Cup final despite being reduced to ten players in the first half. That meant Glasgow City went without silverware for the first time in 18 years.

City believe there is a still a place for them in the game, arguing there is room for a non-sectarian independent club focused entirely on the development and promotion of female players.

They may well be right, but it will not take Rangers and Celtic to flex much of their overwhelming financial muscle to gain a similar stranglehold on the title as in the men's game.

Rangers' team had several notable players including Dutch international Tessel Middag, formerly of Manchester City, eight current Scottish internationals including Jane Ross, Lizzie Arnot and Nicola Docherty, and veteran Denmark defender Janni Arnth.

This experienced group went through the 27-match season unbeaten, winning the title by seven points with an +86 goal difference. Only Glasgow City resisted, drawing two of the three meetings.

In crowning new league champions, Scotland was very much an exception. Of the 20 highest-ranked leagues (by UEFA co-efficient), 14 play a winter season and Ukraine's was, obviously, suspended. In eight of the remaining 13 the title was retained and in the other four the previous holders won it back.

In the major European leagues Chelsea, Barcelona and Juventus all retained their titles.

There was a change in France, but Lyon regaining the crown from Paris Saint-Germain was a reversion to the norm, OL having won the previous 14.

Similarly, in Germany, Wolfsburg won their fifth title in six years having briefly been usurped by Bayern Munich.

> It was the first fruit of the Old Firm's new interest in the women's game, one which is likely to lead to a new era

It was much the same elsewhere. Twente, HB Hoge, St Polten, Benfica and Apollon Limassol staying on the summit in, respectively, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Portugal and Cyprus.

In the Czech Republic the title has been shared by the two Prague clubs, Sparta and Slavia, since its formation in 1993. Slavia regained the title from Sparta, their sixth success in the last ten seasons.

Back on top... French and European champions Lyon

The other change was in Switzerland where last year's champions Servette again won the regular league but lost to Zurich on penalties in the final of the post-season play-off series.

Surprisingly, Zurich and Apollon were the only two of these 13 clubs to win both the men's and women's leagues last season, which suggests the influence of parent-club cash can be overstated.

It is, though, enormously influential, which is why there was huge relief at Chelsea when it became clear the new owners, under American businessman Todd Boehly (who nearly took a stake in NWSL champions Washington Spirit last year), would continue to back the women's side.

Manager Emma Hayes had lunch with Boehly before the Women's FA Cup final, which Chelsea also retained by beating Manchester City 3-2 with Australia's Sam Kerr scoring twice, as she did last year.

"I had a really lovely couple of hours with [Boehly]," said Hayes. "He was delightful, really passionate about Chelsea. He's ambitious, as we are, and it's a perfect fit."

Those words were soon backed up with action. In came France's Eve Perisset (Bordeaux) and Canada's Kadeisha Buchanan (Lyon) as Hayes sought to shore up a defence that was found wanting in the Champions League. Veterans Ji So-yun (Suwon) and Drew Spence (Tottenham) moved on, along with Jonna Andersson (Hammarby).

The main signing at runners-up Arsenal, who were overhauled late on, was that of a contract extension by

Bucking the trend ...Rangers Women lift their first-ever league trophy

Vivianne Miedema. Aussies Steph Catley and Caitlin Foord also agreed new deals.

In contrast, Manchester City, who recovered from an injury-inflicted bad start to steal the third Champions League qualifying place from rivals United, are engaged in a summer of change.

Janine Beckie (Portland Thorns), Georgia Stanway (Bayern Munich), Lucy Bronze (Barcelona), Caroline Weir and Jill Scott have left. Replacing them are La Liga trio Deyna Castellanos, Laia Aleixandri (both from Atletico Madrid) and Leila Ouahabi (Barcelona).

Like Chelsea, Barcelona won their third successive league title and retained the cup, defeating Huelva 6-1 in the Copa de la Reina. Dutch forward Lieke Martens subsequently announced she is joining Paris Saint-Germain.

Real Sociedad and Real Madrid took the other Champions League places, the latter ironically overtaking Atletico Madrid on the final day thanks to Barcelona defeating Atleti.

In Italy Juventus also won the double, defeating league runners-up Roma 2-1, having already wrapped up their fifth title in five seasons' existence.

And there was another double in Germany with Wolfsburg defeating Turbine Potsdam 4-0. Turbine were also pipped to a Champions League place, Eintracht Frankfurt taking the third spot behind Bayern.

Lyon followed up taking the title from PSG by securing the services of the Parisian club's Germany defender Sara Dabritz. PSG's troubled season was capped when head coach Didier Olle-Nicolle was suspended following allegations of "inappropriate behaviour and remarks".

Round-up

Favourites ...Brazil are chasing their fourth consecutive Copa crown

BRAZIL THE TEAM TO BEAT IN COPA AMERICA FEMENINA

Brazil inevitably start as favourites to win the ninth Copa America Femenina having won seven of the previous eight including the last three. Argentina were the exception in 2006, when they beat Brazil in the final.

Marta will not be playing as she is recuperating from knee surgery but, though she will be missed, at 36 she is no longer Brazil's dominant player. With Formiga having finally retired, North Carolina Courage's Debinha is the key figure, aided by Atletico Madrid's Ludmila, Arsenal's Rafaelle, and a new generation that includes Courage team-mate Kerolin, OL Reign's Angelina and Bordeaux's Tainara.

Argentina are the most likely side to upset Brazil, though their form has been moderate since an impressive display at the 2019 World Cup when they held Japan and Scotland to draws and only lost 1-0 to England.

Brazil and Argentina are both in Group B, which is bad news for Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela as only two teams qualify automatically for the knockout stages.

Chile, with Lyon's Christiane Endler in goal, and hosts Colombia will be favoured to emerge from Group A. The section also features Bolivia and Ecuador, who open the tournament in Cali on July 8, and Paraguay.

There is an extra incentive for the victors at the July 30 final – a place in the first women's Finalissima against the winners of Euro 2022. This follows the success of the men's match between Italy and Argentina at a sold-out Wembley. The match will be played in Europe with the date and venue to be decided.

The finalists and winners of the third-place play-off qualify for the 2023 World Cup. Fourth place books a slot in the inter-confederational play-off series along with the winner of the fifth-place play-off between the teams coming third in the groups.

COURAGE WIN NWSL CHALLENGE

North Carolina Courage won the NWSL Challenge Cup, defeating Washington Spirit 2-1 in a physical final. After Kerolin's early goal for Courage was cancelled out by competition MVP Ashley Hatch, an appropriately scruffy winner arrived via Spirit defender Taylor Aylmer's own goal.

Champions... Courage captain Abby Erceg

THIRD LYON ACL VICTIM

Lyon have been hit by a trio of serious anterior cruciate ligament injuries with forward Catarina Macario joining Ellie Carpenter and Dzsenifer Marozsan on the sidelines.

Injured... Catarina Macario

American Macario tore her ACL 13 minutes into Lyon's last match of the season. In a breakthrough campaign, the 22-year-old was Lyon's top scorer with 23 goals.

Carpenter was confirmed to have ruptured her ACL early in the Champions League final while Marozsan had surgery earlier in May.

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NICK BIDWELL

Big guns falter

UEFA Nations League marked by lethargic performances and surprise results for big-hitters

Bad start... France's Antoine Griezmann

A lack of motivation in a competition many regard as a set of glorified friendlies. Fatigue at the end of a gruelling season. Call-offs galore. Excessive experimentation. For a host of reasons, the four-round June window of the UEFA Nations League turned out to be a complicated process for a number of Europe's elite teams.

In Group A3, Gareth Southgate's England never left the starting blocks, picking up only two points from 12 available and losing twice to Hungary (1-0 in Budapest, and incredibly 4-0 in Wolverhampton). The home defeat to the Magyars was a deeply embarrassing 90 minutes, the Three Lions' heaviest backyard loss since 1928.

Nations League holders France also hit the wall, winless in four encounters and deservedly slumping to rock bottom in Group A1. Beaten in Paris by both Denmark and Croatia, *Les Bleus* now have a fight on their hands to avoid relegation to League B. "We lacked strength, energy and character," sighed France boss Didier Deschamps.

Throughout this end-of-season period, Deschamps appeared to lose the tactical thread. He had intended to extensively use a three-man back-line

Upset...Roland Sallai celebrates scoring in Hungary's shock 4-0 victory over England

in the Nations League, only to quickly revert back to four. He simply rang too many template changes: a 3-4-1-2 in the 2-1 defeat in Paris against Denmark, a 4-4-2 in Croatia (1-1) and Austria (1-1) and a 4-3-3 in the 1-0 defeat by Croatia at the Stade de France. In charge of France for a decade, Deschamps is currently under a great deal of pressure from fans and media alike. Many are of the opinion that he will not be able to turn it around in time for the World Cup. But at least he should have star frontrunners Karim Benzema and Kylian Mbappe primed and ready to go in the Gulf; not the jaded imposters of the Nations League.

Other big-hitters took a while to get into their stride. Prior to rounding off their June fixtures with a 5-2 thrashing of a new-look Italy in Monchengladbach, Germany had to make do with three consecutive draws in Group A3 (1-1 draws in Italy and Hungary and an identical scoreline versus England in Munich). "The game against Italy was a stress test and we came through it remarkably well," gushed Germany boss Hansi Flick. "We put into practice everything we wanted to see. It was a good team performance, with a strong spine of Neuer in goal, the two centre-backs [Sule and Rudiger], [full-back] Raum, and Kimmich and Muller in midfield."

The mighty Belgium initially flattered to deceive too, left with egg on their face after the Netherlands strode into Brussels and ran out 4-1 victors. Ahead of the game, Kevin De Bruyne seemed to set the tone by declaring in the build-up: "For me, the Nations League is unimportant. We have to play those matches, but it's a kind of practice campaign. Everyone has had a very tough season."

Impressive Spain...striker Alvaro Morata celebrates scoring against arch-rivals Portugal

Fortunately for the Belgians, normal service was swiftly resumed, with a 6-1 thrashing of Poland. "You can always lose a match but what makes a team special is how well it reacts to a loss," declared *Diables Rouges* coach Roberto Martinez.

> "For me, the Nations League is unimportant. We have to play those matches, but it's a kind of practice campaign. Everyone has had a very tough season"
>
> Belgium midfielder Kevin De Bruyne

With consistency apparently so hard to find these days, full marks to the A stream group leaders. A1 pace-setters Denmark boast a side worth much more than the sum of its parts; in Group A4, the Netherlands seem to have added mental toughness to their undoubted technical and tactical polish; while Hungary (A3) are a much-improved outfit under Italian head coach Marco Rossi. Unbeaten Spain, who are a point clear of Portugal in A2, still have their detractors in their homeland, yet they remain strong collectively, steely of spirit and wedded to their identity. Teenage Barcelona midfielder Gavi was particularly impressive, inciting *La Roja* coach Luis Enrique to compare him to an "erupting volcano".

After the heartbreak of losing to Wales in the World Cup play-offs, Ukraine continued to keep the blue-and-yellow flag flying, remaining unbeaten in three encounters and moving to the top of Group B1. Israel and Bosnia-Herzegovina assumed pole position in B2 and B3 respectively. In a very competitive Group B4, Norway already look a good bet to claim the spoils, beating Sweden home and away and winning 1-0 in Serbia. Unsurprisingly, Norway's main man was ace marksman Erling Haaland, who netted no fewer than five times.

Turkey and Greece were the cream of the crop in the third tier of the competition, signing off with 100 per cent records in Groups C1 and C2. Kazakhstan and Georgia, both unbeaten, set up camp atop Groups C3 and C4.

Latvia, victorious in their first four matches in D1, are almost home and dry in the promotion stakes. In D2, Estonia and Malta are neck-and-neck.

Five goals...Norway striker Erling Haaland

CONCACAF

STEVE MENARY

Favourites tripped up

USA, Canada and Mexico all trail in their Nations League groups

Central American teams lead the way in the race for places in the four-team finals of the latest CONCACAF Nations League.

The winners of the four League A groups will qualify for next June's finals and in Group D holders USA trail El Salvador. The USA would be even further behind had Seattle Sounders' Jordan Morris' stoppage-time goal not secured a 1-1 draw in San Salvador.

Honduras lead Group C after holding on to beat Canada 2-1 in San Pedro Sula. But the Canadians have a game in hand, and the Central Americans' chances of a second successive appearance at the finals could be dented by a shock 2-1 earlier home defeat to Curacao.

Panama were able to open up a four-point gap in Group B after a 2-0 win over Costa Rica, who then left for Qatar and a World Cup play-off with New Zealand that proved more successful.

In Group A, Jamaica lead 2021 runners-up Mexico. The two sides drew 1-1 in Kingston but an earlier

Tripped up... Christian Pulisic is tackled during USA's draw in El Salvador

0-0 draw in Suriname could dent Jamaica's chances of becoming the Nations League's first Caribbean finalists.

A number of teams in the bottom two tiers of the Nations League were not able to play games at home, but most managed to overcome this disadvantage.

In League B, shifting to neighbouring Dominican Republic due to security concerns at home did not affect high-scoring Haiti, where Montserrat were beaten 3-2 in Group B. In the next game, the Haitians travelled to Guyana, who were in confident mood after winning 2-1 in Montserrat then beating Bermuda 2-1 at home in Leonora with Chicago Fire's Omari Glasgow scoring three times over the two games.

Worries over travel issues for the following game undermined the hosts' preparations and Haiti romped home 6-2. Complex flight connections forced Guyana's squad to leave straight after the final whistle for the return in Santo Domingo, where the Haitians cruised home 6-0.

Jamaica...Leon Bailey challenges Mexico's Luis Chavez

In Group A, Cuba made the most of finally being able to play a game at home after a gap of four years by beating Barbados 3-0 in Santiago de Cuba then doing the double over Antigua & Barbuda, who had to play in St Kitts & Nevis to avoid a clash with the West Indies cricket side in St John's.

After a 2-0 win in the first leg, a brilliant hat-trick from veteran Arichel Hernandez, one of the few Cubans with experience playing abroad, sealed a 3-1 win. Cuba's game with Guadeloupe in March should decide the group.

Trinidad & Tobago's travails continue and a shock 2-1 defeat to Nicaragua in Managua leaves the Central Americans in the driving seat in Group C, while in Group D French Guiana beat Guatemala 2-0 and the return next year should decide the group winners.

In League C, four teams were forced to relocate for failing to meet FIFA's stadia criteria but losing home advantage did not affected Dutch Caribbean sides Aruba or Bonaire.

In Group A, Bonaire played their home fixtures in the Stadion Rignaal Jean Francisca in Willemstad, where the Dutch territory completed a 2-0 double over the US Virgin Islands. An earlier 2-2 draw with Sint Maarten and a 4-1 victory over the Turks & Caicos Isalands puts promotion within the grasp of Bonaire, who are yet to achieve FIFA membership.

In Group B, only one of the four opening fixtures were staged on a team's home ground with St Kitts & Nevis drawing 1-1 with Saint Martin in Basseterre.

Saint Martin hosted Aruba in Anguilla, where the two territories ground out a 0-0 draw, before shifting to Willemstad in Curacao for the return, where the Arubaanse cruised home 3-0 with a brace from Alemannia Aachen striker Terence Groothusen.

The USA would be even further behind had Seattle Sounders' Jordan Morris' stoppage-time goal not secured a 1-1 draw in San Salvador

Aruba could have clinched promotion back in Willemstad two days later, but were edged out 3-2 by St Kitts & Nevis and the group will be decided by the rematch in March.

In Group C, Dominica also moved their first "home" game with Anguilla to St Kitts due to a clash with cricket. The two sides drew 1-1. Neither team could find the net against Saint Lucia, who secured an immediate return to League B after beating Dominica – this time back home in Roseau – 1-0 then defeating Anguilla 2-0 in Gros Islet to set off a promotion party.

Group D was also decided before the final round of games next year after Puerto Rico secured a decisive 3-0 win in the Cayman Islands then trounced the British Virgin Islands 6-0 at home to secure promotion.

Upset...Honduras winger Kevin Lopez celebrates after scoring against Canada

Africa

MARK GLEESON

AFCON qualifying underway

Africa's World Cup contingent cruise past sub-par opponents in opening exchanges

Africa's five World Cup-bound teams were handed no favours by having to compete in the opening two rounds of 2023 Africa Cup of Nations group qualifying in June and therefore forego the opportunity of some better practice before November's tournament in Qatar.

Senegal, for example, were hardly tested in beating both Benin and Rwanda, although they needed a last-gasp Sadio Mane penalty to beat the latter in Dakar.

The mediocrity in quality of the opponents led to a call from Lions of Teranga coach Aliou Cisse for the next round of qualifiers in September to be postponed and for Senegal, Cameroon, Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia to all be allowed to organise friendlies against nations from other continents to better prepare for Qatar.

The Europeans will be playing their Nations League but South American and Asian countries are free, and likely keen, to play.

But it is unlikely that Cisse will get his way. There are only two more windows for the qualifiers to be played (September and March 2023) before the next Cup of Nations finals are hosted in the Ivory Coast in mid-2023.

Ghana and Tunisia did manage to cram participation in Japan's Kirin Cup after two Cup of Nations qualifiers each in June but the next window allows for only two games per team.

Tunisia won the four-nation tournament in Japan after they had beaten Equatorial Guinea 4-0 and drawn 0-0 away in Botswana, using largely a fringe side, to make a good start to their Group J campaign.

Ghana eased past Madagascar 3-0 at home but then drew with the Central African Republic in neutral Luanda in

Impressive... Tunisia enjoyed a successful June

Not tested... Senegal talisman Sadio Mane

their second Group E match before the long trip to the Far East.

The positive pre-planning of both Ghana and Tunisia contrasted with that of Cameroon, who ended up playing a single game in June as their Cup of Nations qualifying group was reduced to three countries because of the disqualification of Kenya.

That lone match was a laboured 1-0 victory away against tiny Burundi.

Cameroon should have anticipated, however, that Kenya would be kicked out of the competition as their inclusion in April's draw was a long shot anyway with their participation contingent on a resolution of the issue of government interference in the running of their football association's affairs. But Cameroon had no contingency plan, even with their squad together for a fortnight in a disappointing start for the new Samuel Eto'o administration.

Zimbabwe were also kicked out of the qualifiers, reducing Morocco's group to three. But the Atlas Lions still got some decent World Cup preparation with a friendly defeat in the United States, followed by a late come-from-behind win at home to South Africa at the start of Group K and another three points against Liberia.

In September, Morocco are free to organise pre-World Cup friendlies in place of a scheduled double date with Zimbabwe.

The mediocrity in quality of the opponents led to a call from Senegal coach Aliou Cisse for the next round of qualifiers in September to be postponed

Hector Cuper was the first managerial casualty, fired after the Democratic Republic of Congo lost at home to Gabon and then away in the Sudan. The home defeat was made even worse by the fact Gabon arrived late with only 17 players and without coach Patrice Neveu after an airport mix-up in Barcelona, yet still won 1-0.

Namibia evicted Bobby Samaria after their 1-1 draw with Burundi and replaced him with former captain Collin Benjamin, who was at Hamburg in the Bundesliga during his playing days.

And Egypt's Ehab Galal was next to be shown the exit door after the Pharaohs lost away against Ethiopia in the biggest upset of the opening two rounds. Mohamed Salah missed the match and Egypt could have lost by even more. Galal was appointed in April after Egypt decided not to proceed with Carlos Queiroz but Egypt's FA have since said they are looking at the contingency of another foreign coach.

Nigeria's 10-0 win over the small island nation of Sao Tome e Principe, with Victor Osimhen scoring four, was a record score for a qualifying tie in the history of preliminary matches for the Cup of Nations.

Sao Tome qualified by edging Mauritius 4-3 on aggregate in their March preliminary tie, but were then disqualified by the Confederation of African Football because captain Luis Leal broke COVID-19 test rules. But they appealed and were reinstated just nine days before their first group game.

The top two teams from each of the 12 qualifying groups will compete at next year's finals, except Group H where the host nation Ivory Coast are participating. Only one other team will go through with the Ivorians.

AFCON hosts...Ivory Coast

Record breakers...Napoli striker Victor Osimhen scored four goals in Nigeria's 10-0 thrashing of minnows Sao Tome e Principe in Group A

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

New and old faces at the 2023 Asian Cup

Tajikistan qualify for the finals for the first time, while Hong Kong end a 55-year wait for qualification

There may have been more attention on Asian teams in the World Cup play-offs in the first half of June, with Australia overcoming United Arab Emirates and then Peru to book the penultimate spot in Qatar, but there was plenty of other qualification action elsewhere on the continent. The Socceroos had, along with 12 other teams, already booked their place in the 2023 Asian Cup but from June 8 to June 14, 11 others completed the line-up.

Some are unfamiliar. Tajikistan defeated Myanmar and Singapore to claim their first-ever appearance with a game to spare. Led by experienced striker Manuchekhr Dzhalilov, the team actually topped the group above fellow Central Asians and hosts Kyrgyzstan, who also qualified for a second time.

Wait over... Hong Kong players celebrate qualification

Record scorer...India legend Sunil Chhetri

Impressive...Indonesia manager Shin Tae-yong

"I can only tell the Tajikistan people that they can be very proud of these boys," said Tajikistan coach Petar Segrt. "Kyrgyzstan were very good, but we are better, because we were first. This is most important, to be first. We have worked hard to get to the Asian Cup and now we can't wait to show what we can do."

Tajikistan may be the only debutant among the 24 but the last time Hong Kong made it was back in 1968 when the territory still had almost 30 years of British rule ahead. Now the team has returned to the continental stage under the guidance of Jorn Andersen, a Norwegian coach who was also in charge of North Korea from 2016 to 2018.

With a new and energetic line-up, compared to many previous teams that looked to keep things tight first and foremost, Hong Kong finished above Afghanistan and Cambodia and that was enough. With the domestic league shut down since last December due to the pandemic, the achievement is even more worthy of celebration. "I hope new young players can come out and I can have more possibilities for the future and try to build a team out of this team," Andersen said. "We have a new and young team...I'm very proud of my team. We have played a good tournament and I am very satisfied."

India topped the group, making it for the second successive time, though did have all three games on home soil. There have been some politics causing problems in Indian football recently but on the pitch, it could barely have gone better. Sunil Chhetri, the veteran striker, netted four in the three games to finish as top scorer and also take his international tally to 84, the third-highest active goalscorer behind Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Such goals helped the Blue Tigers become one of five teams to take maximum points from the three games along with Jordan, Palestine, Uzbekistan and Bahrain.

Tajikistan defeated Myanmar and Singapore to claim their first-ever appearance with a game to spare

Southeast Asia will have four representatives at the tournament. Thailand and Vietnam were there last time around but Malaysia and Indonesia last appeared in 2007 when they co-hosted. That is not the only thing they have in common: both have South Korean coaches in charge.

Shin Tae-yong's achievement with a young Indonesian team was especially impressive. There have been plenty of problems over the years with corruption, incompetence and violence holding the country of 270 million back. With the group taking place in Kuwait, to beat and finish above the hosts was a great result. There was a narrow defeat against group winners Jordan and the place in the Asian Cup was clinched with a 7-0 thrashing of Nepal.

"Before coming to Kuwait, there was a plan, namely to win twice and draw once," said Shin, who was in charge of South Korea at the 2018 World Cup. "Aiming for a draw against Jordan and then winning the other two and I am delighted that we achieved [the latter]."

It was 1980 when Malaysia actually last made it to the finals via qualification. There's no doubt that playing at home in Kuala Lumpur helped, especially in the crucial opening win, 3-1 against Turkmenistan, the team that were always likely to be direct rivals for second with Bahrain the hot favourites to finish first. Malaysia bounced back from their narrow 2-1 defeat to Bahrain to see off Bangladesh 4-1 in the final game. "We have done it. I'm proud of the players, they showed how good they were, they gave their everything. We delivered what the fans wanted...the players showed their professionalism and their love for the country," said Kim Pan-gon.

Fellow Southeast Asian team Philippines were perhaps the surprise failures. In May, former US international Thomas Dooley returned for a second spell as coach but a 0-0 draw with Yemen means that the Azkals miss out as the worst runners-up.

Japan

JOHN DUERDEN

2022 East Asian Football Federation Championship

Four teams will be heading to Japan with different priorities

The 2022 East Asian Football Federation (EAFF) Championship kicks off on July 19 with South Korea, China and Hong Kong all heading to Japan to take on the host nation in a round-robin tournament. It may not be the biggest international meet-up this year but it is important for the four national teams involved, though for different reasons.

China are especially keen to play three games against regional rivals in the space of eight days. After all, this tournament was supposed to have taken place in the Middle Kingdom but due to lockdowns in major cities and strict travel restrictions in place for both getting in and out of the country as the government maintains a "zero-COVID" policy, a decision was taken in April that it would be switched to Japan.

COVID also means that China have been lacking in game time compared to the other three, only playing World Cup qualifiers in recent months. The team's form has been poor with their last seven games producing four defeats and three draws, while they also finished next to bottom of their qualification group with just six points from their ten games, eight behind Oman in fourth and just two above last-placed Vietnam. As dreams of Qatar started to fade, coach Li Tie resigned and was replaced in December by Li Xiaopeng. With poor results continuing into 2022, the new Li could really do with some positive news. Fans have started to turn away from the chronically underperforming men's team, especially after the women won the Asian Cup in February.

The East Asian Championship then marks the start of Team Dragon's preparations for the men's Asian Cup in 2023 – another tournament that China were due to host before pulling out in May. At least the Chinese Super League has started, although there will be no naturalised Brazilians in Japan as the likes of Elkeson and Aloisio are back playing in South America. It remains to be seen if Li shakes things up and

Underwhelming... China suffered a poor campaign in World Cup qualifying

Fresh ideas...Hong Kong coach Jorn Andersen watches his team in training

leaves out players in their mid-30 – such as Hao Junmin and Yu Dabao – and brings in some younger blood.

In contrast, Hong Kong will arrive in Japan in high spirits after successfully qualifying for their first Asian Cup since 1968. Victories over Afghanistan and Cambodia in June were enough to get through the group for a team that have been improving their style of play since the arrival of Norwegian coach Jorn Andersen in December.

A training camp in Thailand earlier this year was a game-changer. "We were together for a few weeks, we trained a lot, we trained hard and we had some important meetings where we agreed which style we wanted to play," said Andersen, a former coach of Mainz and North Korea. "Hard pressing, creating chances, making goals – that is what people want to see on the field, not slow old-game football."

The situation for defending EAFF champions South Korea as well as hosts Japan is a little different. The two giants of East Asian football are focused firmly on the World Cup in November and see this regional meet as part of those preparations. They also mark what could be the last chance for local players to catch the eye of the coaches as the European-based stars such as Son Heung-min and Takumi Minamino are busy with their clubs in pre-season.

It will be a particularly great opportunity for Japan's home-based fringe players. Of the 28-man squad named by coach Hajime Moriyasu for June friendlies and wins over Paraguay and Ghana and a hard-fought 1-0 defeat to Brazil, only six are in the J.League. The rest are active in Germany, France, Scotland, Spain, England, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal.

South Korea don't have quite as many players in Europe and their Japanese-based players will be free to participate in the tournament. Results in June were more mixed: a 5-1 thrashing at the hands of Brazil was embarrassing and was followed by a 2-0 win over Chile and a 2-2 draw with Paraguay. There are still some question marks over coach Paulo Bento and, while winning the East Asian Cup will not have people dancing in the streets of Seoul, poor results could be an issue.

> The East Asian Championship then marks the start of China's preparations for the men's Asian Cup in 2023

After all, Jo Bonfrere was fired after a poor 2005 East Asian Cup that came just weeks after the end of a successful World Cup qualification campaign.

Failure in East Asia does not go down well, even for those such as South Korea and Japan who have bigger fish to fry.

Holders...South Korea defeated Japan 1-0 in the 2019 final

Opportunity... Ayase Ueda is among the J.League's top scorers in 2022

Papua New Guinea

STEVE MENARY

All eyes on Paris

Pacific Islanders now targeting the Olympics after positive experience in World Cup qualifiers in Qatar

Qualifying clash...Papua New Guinea taking on New Zealand in Qatar

Qualifying for this year's World Cup finals in Qatar was a missed opportunity for Papua New Guinea but the next event remains a more realistic target.

PNG were one of eight teams from the Oceania region that travelled to Qatar in March for the highly unsatisfactory 2022 qualifiers, which were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

No team in Oceania was able to host matches due to health restrictions, and the likes of Vanuatu did not even manage a competitive game before returning home due to COVID.

Marcos Gusmao's PNG team at least managed a full series of group games and an opening 1-0 defeat to New Zealand showed that bridging the gap between Oceania's dominant force is not impossible.

A sole strike from Tommy Semmy, who plays for Altona Magic in Australia, beat New Caledonia and he scored again along with Ati Kepo to beat Fiji 2-1 in the decisive group game.

Defender Alwin Komolong, who spent two years in Germany with Stuttgart Kickers and Fortuna Cologne from 2017, put Gusmao's team ahead in the semi-final but the Solomon Islands came back to win 3-2.

On arriving last September, Gusmao had two targets: improving PNG's world ranking and qualifying for the World Cup. With PNG's ranking only ten places off its record of 152, he has fulfilled one. Returning to Qatar this November for the World Cup finals was always a tall order, but Gusmao views the qualifiers as a positive experience.

"It was great, especially working with FIFA people," says the Brazilian, who was with Model Town FC in Pakistan before he landed his first national team role.

Since returning from Qatar, Gusmao has been travelling across the 180,000 square mile country, which occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, to put together Under-19 and Under-23 teams.

The Under-23 team is needed as PNG target the qualifiers for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris.

The Olympics have provided major tournament experience for Fiji and Tahiti, who have both qualified, but Gusmao is unlikely to be around. "My contract is for one year," he adds. "There is the possibility of renewing my contract that ends in October. But I want to go to some club in Asia, Middle East or South America."

If Gusmao goes, whoever steps into the job will have the 2023 Pacific Games football tournament in the Solomon Islands and the Olympic qualifiers before the World Cup qualifiers come round again.

Both will provide valuable experience and getting more players overseas will also help. Apart from Semmy, the only other PNG player playing abroad is attacking midfielder David Browne with HJK in Finland.

Gusmao adds: "Football agents need to come to this part of the world more and see the players in action. I believe that the lack of structure still makes this path difficult, but this is not far from happening."

> "Football agents need to come to this part of the world more and see the players in action"
>
> Papua New Guinea coach Marcos Gusmao

In the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, Oceania is guaranteed one finals place and a potential second via an inter-confederational play-off. For whoever takes on the PNG job, that will be the long-term focus.

Goalscorer... Tommy Semmy in Qatar

JULY 9-AUGUST 5

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

European qualifying

The first qualifying round for the 2022-23 Champions League season begins in the week of July 5, with the second legs a week later. Bodo/Glimt of Norway and Bulgarian giants Ludogorets are among the teams in action at this stage, with the champions of Poland and Azerbaijan meeting when Lech Poznan take on Qarabag, while Linfield and The New Saints meet in an all-UK clash. The losing sides will advance to the second stage of Europa Conference League qualifying.

Some teams are already into the second round of Champions League qualifying, including Ukraine's Dynamo Kyiv and Fenerbahce of Turkey, who meet on July 20 and again on July 27. The losers will drop into Europa League qualifying.

European hopefuls... Bodo/Glimt

Euro 2022

The Women's European Championship kicks off on July 6, then there are two games per day from July 8 until the group stage ends on July 18. The quarter-finals get underway two days later, with the Wembley final on Sunday, July 31.

Women's Championships

The Euros aren't the only women's continental championships taking place this summer: the Women's AFCON runs from July 2-23, the CONCACAF equivalent from July 4-18, and the Copa America Femenina from July 8-30.

COSAFA Cup

The Council of Southern Africa Football Association's annual competition takes place in Durban, South Africa, from July 5-17. The hosts, along with Madagascar, Namibia, Zambia, Mozambique and Senegal have been handed byes to the quarter-finals, awaiting the winners of the two groups featuring Angola, Comoros, Seychelles and Botswana in Group A, and Malawi, Lesotho, Mauritius and Eswatini in Group B.

Season starts

The Russian and Polish leagues will be among the first major European top flights to begin their 2022-23 seasons when they kick off on July 15. The EFL campaign begins on the final weekend of July, with Huddersfield and Burnley kicking things off in the Championship on Friday, July 29. The Scottish Premiership begins on the same weekend, with the English, German, Dutch and French top flights beginning a week later.

Cup kick-offs

The German Cup gets underway on the final week of July, a week before the league season begins. Meanwhile, the group stage of the Scottish League Cup runs from July 9-24.

Up for grabs... the Community Shield

Curtain raisers

Saturday, July 30 will see the traditional season curtain raisers in England, Germany and France. Liverpool face Manchester City at Wembley in the Community Shield, RB Leipzig take on Bayern Munich in the German Super Cup, while Paris Saint-Germain's opponents in the Champions Trophy are Nantes. The Italian and Spanish Super Cups don't take place until January, the latter in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Major League Soccer

The 2022 season continues throughout the summer with a number of notable games. The "*El Trafico*" derby between the Western Conference's early front-runners LAFC and LA Galaxy takes place on July 9, with Florida rivals Orlando City and Inter Miami meeting in the East the day after. A week later, the two New York clubs, Red Bull and NYCFC, meet in a potential top-of-the-table clash in the Eastern Conference.

MLS champions ...New York City FC star Valentin Castellanos

Internationals

2022 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

European Play-Off Semi-Final

Jun 1 – Glasgow
Scotland 1 (McGregor 79)
Ukraine 3 (Yarmolenko 33, Yaremchuk 49, Dovbyk 90+5)
Scotland: Gordon – McTominay, Hanley, Cooper (Hendry 68), Hickey, Gilmour (Armstrong 68), McGregor, McGinn, Robertson, Adams, Dykes (Christie 46).
Ukraine: Bushchan – Karavaev, Zabarnyi, Matvienko, Mykolenko, Stepanenko (Sydorchuk 90+4), Yarmolenko (Zubkov 78), Malinovskyi (Shaparenko 72), Zinchenko, Tsygankov (Mudryk 72), Yaremchuk (Dovbyk 78).

European Play-Off Final

Jun 5 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Yarmolenko 34 og)
Ukraine 0
Wales: Hennessey – Ampadu, Rodon, B. Davies, C. Roberts, Allen, Ramsey, N. Williams (Norrington-Davies 90+3), Bale (Wilson 83), James (Johnson 71), Moore.
Ukraine: Bushchan – Karavaev, Zabarnyi, Matvienko, Mykolenko, Stepanenko (Sydorchuk 70), Yarmolenko, Malinovskyi (Shaparenko 70), Zinchenko, Tsygankov (Mudryk 77), Yaremchuk (Dovbyk 77).

Asian Play-Off

Jun 7 – Al Rayyan
United Arab Emirates 1 (Caio 57)
Australia 2 (Irvine 53, Hrustic 84)
UAE: Eisa – Ebraheim, Al Hammadi, Al Attas, Abbas, Hamad (Abdulrahman 89), Salmin (Hassan 88), Caio (Tagliabue 89), Ramadan (Nader 75), Abdalla, Mabkhout (Saleh 75).
Australia: Ryan – Atkinson, Wright, Rowles, Behich, Hrustic (Degenek 90+1), Mooy, Boyle, Irvine, Goodwin (Maclaren 72), Leckie (Mabil 90+1).

Inter-Confederational Play-Offs

Jun 13 – Al Rayyan
Australia 0
Peru 0
After Extra-Time. Australia win 5-4 on penalties
Australia: Ryan (Redmayne 120) – Atkinson (Karacic 90), Wright, Rowles, Behich (Goodwin 120), Hrustic, Mooy, Boyle, Irvine, Leckie (Maclaren 87), Duke (Mabil 69).
Peru: Gallese – Advincula, Zambrano, Callens, Trauco, Tapia, Pena (Aquino 80), Gonzales, Carrillo (Flores 65), Cueva (Valera 116), Lapadula.

Jun 14 – Al Rayyan
Costa Rica 1 (Campbell 3)
New Zealand 0
Costa Rica: Navas – Fuller (Martinez 46), Duarte, Calvo, Oviedo, Torres (Waston 46), Borges (Chacon 79), Tejeda, Bennette (Ruiz 46), Campbell (Venegas 90+3), Contreras.
New Zealand: Sail – Tuiloma, Reid (Just 72), Pijnaker, Kirwan (Payne 79), Lewis (Stamenic 80), Bell, Garbett (Waine 60), Cacace, Greive (Barbarouses 60), Wood.
Sent off: Barbarouses 69.

FINALISSIMA

Jun 1 – Wembley
Italy 0
Argentina 3 (L. Martinez 28, Di Maria 45+1, Dybala 90+4)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bonucci, Chiellini (Lazzari 46), Emerson (Bastoni 77), Jorginho, Pessina (Spinazzola 62), Barella, Bernardeschi (Locatelli 46), Raspadori, Belotti (Scamacca 46).
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero (Pezzella 85), Otamendi, Tagliafico, Rodriguez, De Paul (Palacios 76), Di Maria (Gonzalez 90+1), Messi, Lo Celso (Dybala 90+1), L. Martinez (Alvarez 85).

2022-23 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1

Jun 3 – Osijek
Croatia 0
Austria 3 (Arnautovic 41, Gregoritsch 54, Sabitzer 57)
Croatia: Ivusic – Juranovic, Caleta-Car, Pongracic, Sosa (Barisic 46), Brozovic, Kovacic (Orsic 71), Majer (Modric 58), Pasalic (Vlasic 58), Brekalo, Kramaric (Budimir 58).
Austria: Lindner – Danso, Trauner, Wober (Friedl 77), Lainer (Trimmel 46), Laimer, Sabitzer, Schlager, Weimann (Baumgartner 72), Onisiwo (Gregoritsch 46), Arnautovic (Seiwald 46).

Jun 3 – Saint-Denis
France 1 (Benzema 51)
Denmark 2 (Cornelius 68, 88)
France: Lloris – Kounde (Diaby 90+2), Varane (Saliba 61), L. Hernandez, Coman (Clauss 90+2), Kante, Tchouameni, T. Hernandez, Griezmann (Rabiot 78), Mbappe (Nkunku 46), Benzema.
Denmark: Schmeichel – Andersen, Vestergaard (Kristensen 60), Nelsson, Wass (Damsgaard 60), Delaney (Jensen 85), Hojbjerg, Maehle, Eriksen, Skov Olsen (Braithwaite 84), Dolberg (Cornelius 60).

Jun 6 – Split
Croatia 1 (Kramaric 83 pen)
France 1 (Rabiot 52)
Croatia: Livakovic – Juranovic, Erlic, Vida, Barisic, Modric (Sucic 79), Brozovic, Kovacic (Vlasic 79), Majer (Pasalic 63), Brekalo (Orsic 63), Budimir (Kramaric 69).
France: Maignan – Pavard, Saliba, Kimpembe, Digne, Tchouameni (Kamara 62), Guendouzi, Diaby (Clauss 79), Nkunku, Rabiot, Ben Yedder (Griezmann 62).

Jun 6 – Vienna
Austria 1 (Schlager 67)
Denmark 2 (Hojbjerg 28, Stryger Larsen 84)
Austria: Pentz – Trimmel, Posch (Danso 63), Alaba, Friedl (Wober 78), Seiwald, Schlager, Laimer, Baumgartner (Sabitzer 46), Ljubicic (Arnautovic 46), Kalajdzic (Gregoritsch 46).
Denmark: Schmeichel – Andersen, Vestergaard (Cornelius 52), Nelsson, Kristensen, Jensen (Delaney 80), Hojbjerg, Maehle (Stryger Larsen 66), Eriksen, Braithwaite (Skov Olsen 52), Poulsen (Damsgaard 52).

Jun 10 – Vienna
Austria 1 (Weimann 37)
France 1 (Mbappe 83)
Austria: Pentz – Lainer (Lazaro 54), Trauner, Alaba (Danso 69), Wober, Laimer, Schlager, Seiwald, Sabitzer, Weimann (Gregoritsch 64), Arnautovic (Onisiwo 64).
France: Lloris – Pavard, Saliba, Konate, T. Hernandez, Tchouameni (Guendouzi 63), Kamara, Diaby, Griezmann (Mbappe 63), Coman (Nkunku 79), Benzema.

Jun 10 – Copenhagen
Denmark 0
Croatia 1 (Pasalic 69)
Denmark: Schmeichel – Wass (Kristensen 61), Andersen, Christensen, Maehle, Hojbjerg, Delaney, Skov Olsen (Poulsen 83, Skov 90), Eriksen, Damsgaard (Braithwaite 62), Cornelius (Wind 62).
Croatia: Livakovic – Vrsaljko (Stanisic 46), Erlic, Sutalo, Juranovic, Jakic (Kovacic 46), Brozovic, Ivanusec (Modric 46), Pasalic, Orsic (Vlasic 58), Kramaric (Budimir 77).

Jun 13 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Wind 21, Skov Olsen 37)
Austria 0
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen (Nelsson 63), Christensen, Boilesen, Maehle (Stryger Larsen 49), Jensen (Eriksen 76), Hojbjerg, Skov Olsen (Billing 46), Wind, Cornelius (Braithwaite 46).
Austria: Lindner – Trimmel, Danso, Trauner, Lazaro (Lainer 46), Wimmer (Onisiwo 46), Schlager (Laimer 46), Seiwald, Sabitzer, Weimann (Gregoritsch 65), Kalajdzic (Arnautovic 65).

Jun 13 – Saint-Denis
France 0
Croatia 1 (Modric 5 pen)
France: Maignan – Kounde (Pavard 46), Konate, Kimpembe, Digne, Guendouzi (Griezmann 80), Kamara (Tchouameni 46), Rabiot, Nkunku (Coman 73), Mbappe, Benzema.
Croatia: Ivusic – Stanisic, Erlic, Sutalo, Juranovic, Modric, Brozovic, Kovacic (Sucic 90+2), Pasalic (Majer 65), Brekalo (Vlasic 73), Budimir (Kramaric 73).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Denmark	4	3	0	1	6	3	9
Croatia	4	2	1	1	3	4	7
Austria	4	1	1	2	5	5	4
France	4	0	2	2	3	5	2

Group A2

Jun 2 – Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Kuchta 11, Sow 58 og)
Switzerland 1 (Okafor 44)
Czech Republic: Vaclik – Coufal, Zima, Brabec, Krejci, Zeleny (Mateju 87), Soucek, Sadilek (Kalvach 84), Jankto (Lingr 67), Hlozek (Jurecka 87), Kuchta (Pesek 68).
Switzerland: Sommer – Widmer, Schar, Elvedi, Rodriguez (Lotomba 87), Sow (Zuber 68), Freuler, Xhaka, Vargas (Seferovic 87), Okafor (Shaqiri 68), Embolo (Gavranovic 90+2).

Jun 2 – Seville
Spain 1 (Morata 25)
Portugal 1 (Horta 82)
Spain: Simon – Azpilicueta, D. Llorente, P. Torres, Alba, Soler (Koke 63), Busquets, Gavi (M. Llorente 81), F. Torres (Olmo 63), Sarabia, Morata (De Tomas 70).
Portugal: Costa – Cancelo, Pepe, Danilo, Guerreiro, Fernandes (Nunes 81), Moutinho (Neves 46), B. Silva, Otavio (Ronaldo 62), Leao (Horta 72), A. Silva (Guedes 62).

Jun 5 – Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Pesek 4, Kuchta 66)
Spain 2 (Gavi 45+3, Martinez 90)
Czech Republic: Vaclik – Coufal, Zima, Brabec, Mateju, Zeleny (Jankto 24, Havel 46), Soucek, Sadilek, Lingr (Cerny 59), Pesek (Hlozek 59), Kuchta (Jurecka 78).
Spain: Simon – Carvajal, Garcia, Martinez, Alonso, Koke (M. Llorente 72), Rodri (Busquets 61), Gavi, Olmo (Asensio 61), Sarabia (F. Torres 46), De Tomas (Morata 61).

Jun 5 – Lisbon
Portugal 4 (William 15, Ronaldo 35, 39, Cancelo 68)
Switzerland 0
Portugal: Patricio – Cancelo, Pepe, Danilo, Mendes, Fernandes (B. Silva 67), Neves (Palhinha 77), William (Nunes 84), Otavio (Leao 77), Jota (Horta 67), Ronaldo.
Switzerland: Kobel – Mbabu, Schar, Frei, Rodriguez (Okafor 62), Sow (Gavranovic 81), Xhaka, Steffen (Bottani 70), Shaqiri (Freuler 69), Lotomba, Seferovic (Embolo 62).

Jun 9 – Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Cancelo 33, Guedes 38)
Czech Republic 0
Portugal: Costa – Cancelo, Pepe, Danilo, Guerreiro, Neves (Moutinho 88), B. Silva (Vitinha 68), William (Fernandes 68), Guedes (Palhinha 88), Jota (Leao 80), Ronaldo.
Czech Republic: Stanek – Coufal, Zima, Brabec, Mateju (Kral 80), Havel (Jemelka 46), Soucek, Sadilek, Lingr (Pesek 46), Hlozek (Vlkanova 73), Kuchta (Jurecka 46).

Jun 9 – Geneva
Switzerland 0
Spain 1 (Sarabia 13)
Switzerland: Sommer – Widmer, Akanji (Frei 79), Comert, Rodriguez (Sow 89), Freuler, Xhaka, Aebischer (Okafor 63), Shaqiri (Seferovic 80), Zuber (Steffen 63), Embolo.
Spain: Simon – Azpilicueta, D. Llorente, P. Torres, Alba, M. Llorente (Soler 80), Busquets, Gavi (Koke 73), F. Torres, Sarabia (Olmo 63), Morata (Asensio 73).

Jun 12 – Malaga
Spain 2 (Soler 24, Sarabia 75)
Czech Republic 0
Spain: Simon – Carvajal, Garcia, Martinez, Alonso (Alba 78), Soler (Gavi 59), Rodri, Koke (Busquets 79), Asensio (Sarabia 72), Olmo, Morata (F. Torres 59).
Czech Republic: Mandous – Coufal, Zima, Brabec, Jemelka, Zeleny (Kalvach 79), Soucek, Sadilek (Kral 30), Cerny (Hlozek 59), Pesek (Tecl 79), Kuchta (Jurecka 59).

Jun 12 – Geneva
Switzerland 1 (Seferovic 1)
Portugal 0
Switzerland: Omlin – Widmer (Steffen 46), Akanji, Elvedi, Rodriguez (Stergiou 79), Freuler, Xhaka, Sow (Aebischer 79), Shaqiri (Okafor 22), Embolo (Zuber 65), Seferovic.
Portugal: Patricio – Cancelo, Pepe, Danilo, Mendes, Vitinha (B. Silva 62), Neves (Horta 82), Fernandes (Nunes 74), Otavio (Guedes 46), Leao (Jota 62), A. Silva.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	4	2	2	0	6	3	8
Portugal	4	2	1	1	7	2	7
Czech Republic	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Switzerland	4	1	0	3	2	7	3

Group A3

Jun 4 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Szoboszlai 66 pen)
England 0
Hungary: Gulacsi – Lang, Orban, At. Szalai, Nego, A. Nagy (Styles 82), Schafer, Z. Nagy (Vecsei 88), Sallai (Kleinheisler 71), Szoboszlai (Fiola 82), Ad. Szalai (Adam 88).
England: Pickford – Walker (Stones 62), Coady (Phillips 79), Maguire, Alexander-Arnold (James 62), Bellingham, Rice, Justin (Saka 46), Bowen, Mount (Grealish 62), Kane.

Jun 4 – Bologna
Italy 1 (Pellegrini 70)
Germany 1 (Kimmich 73)
Italy: Donnarumma – Florenzi, Acerbi, Bastoni, Biraghi (Dimarco 80), Frattesi (Ricci 86), Cristante, Tonali (Pobega 80), Pellegrini, Politano (Gnonto 65), Scamacca (Cancellieri 85).
Germany: Neuer – Henrichs (Hofmann 59), Sule, Rudiger, Kehrer, Kimmich, Goretzka (Gundogan 69), Gnabry (Raum 80), Muller (Havertz 70), Sane (Musiala 59), Werner.

Jun 7 – Munich
Germany 1 (Hofmann 50)
England 1 (Kane 88 pen)
Germany: Neuer – Klostermann, Rudiger, Schlotterbeck, Hofmann (Gnabry 65), Kimmich, Gundogan (Sane 83), Raum, Muller (Goretzka 76), Musiala (Werner 65), Havertz.
England: Pickford – Walker, Stones, Maguire, Trippier, Rice, Phillips (Bellingham 14), Saka (Bowen 80), Mount (Grealish 72), Sterling, Kane.

Jun 7 – Cesena
Italy 2 (Barella 30, Pellegrini 45)
Hungary 1 (Mancini 61 og)
Italy: Donnarumma – Calabria, Mancini, Bastoni, Spinazzola (Dimarco 75), Barella (Tonali 84), Cristante, Pellegrini (Locatelli 66), Gnonto, Politano (Belotti 75), Raspadori (Zerbin 84).
Hungary: Dibusz – Lang, Orban, At. Szalai, Nego (Fiola 58), A. Nagy (Styles 58), Schafer (Vancsa 87), Z. Nagy (Bolla 81), Sallai, Szoboszlai, Ad. Szalai (Adam 87).

Jun 11 – Wolverhampton
England 0
Italy 0
England: Ramsdale – James, Tomori (Guehi 88), Maguire, Trippier, Ward-Prowse, Rice (Phillips 65), Mount (Bowen 65), Grealish, Sterling (Saka 79), Abraham (Kane 65).
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Gatti, Acerbi, Dimarco (Florenzi 87), Frattesi, Locatelli (Gnonto 64), Tonali, Pessina (Cristante 88), Pellegrini (Esposito 64), Scamacca (Raspadori 77).

Jun 11 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Z. Nagy 6)
Germany 1 (Hofmann 9)
Hungary: Gulacsi – Lang, Orban, At. Szalai, Fiola, A. Nagy, Styles (Vecsei 87), Z. Nagy (Nego 70), Sallai (Gazdag 76), Szoboszlai, Ad. Szalai (Adam 69).
Germany: Neuer – Kehrer, Sule, Schlotterbeck, Hofmann (Nmecha 86), Kimmich, Goretzka (Gundogan 69), Raum, Havertz (Adeyemi 85), Musiala (Brandt 78), Werner (Muller 78).

Jun 14 – Wolverhampton
England 0
Hungary 4 (Sallai 16, 70, Z. Nagy 80, Gazdag 89)
England: Ramsdale – Walker, Stones, Guehi, James, Gallagher (Mount 56), Phillips, Bellingham (Foden 68), Bowen (Sterling 46), Saka (Maguire 89), Kane. *Sent off: Stones 82.*
Hungary: Dibusz – Lang, Orban, At. Szalai, Fiola, Schafer, Styles (A. Nagy 56), Z. Nagy, Sallai (Nego 78), Szoboszlai (Gazdag 56), Ad. Szalai (Adam 68).

Jun 14 – Monchengladbach
Germany 5 (Kimmich 10, Gundogan 45+4 pen, Muller 51, Werner 68, 69)
Italy 2 (Gnonto 78, Bastoni 90+4)
Germany: Neuer – Klostermann, Sule (Tah 87), Rudiger, Raum, Gundogan (Stach 88), Kimmich, Hofmann (Gnabry 69), Muller (Musiala 75), Sane, Werner (Nmecha 75).
Italy: Donnarumma – Calabria, Mancini (Scamacca 78), Bastoni, Spinazzola (Dimarco 65), Frattesi (Caprari 46), Cristante, Barella, Politano (Luiz Felipe 44), Gnonto, Raspadori (Scalvini 46).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hungary	4	2	1	1	7	3	7
Germany	4	1	3	0	8	5	6
Italy	4	1	2	1	5	7	5
England	4	0	2	2	1	6	2

Group A4

Jun 1 – Wroclaw
Poland 2 (Kaminski 72, Swiderski 85)
Wales 1 (J. Williams 52)
Poland: Grabara – Bereszynski, Glik, Bednarek, Puchacz (Zalewski 74), Klich (Zurkowski 60), Krychowiak (Grosicki 81), Zielinski, Goralski (Kaminski 60), Buksa (Swiderski 74), Lewandowski.
Wales: Ward (Hennessey 46) – Gunter, Mepham, Norrington-Davies, Smith, Levitt, Morrell, J. Williams (Thomas 77), Burns (N. Williams 61), Moore (Harris 46), James (Matondo 46).

Jun 3 – Brussels
Belgium 1 (Batshuayi 90+3)
Netherlands 4 (Bergwijn 40, Depay 51, 65, Dumfries 61)
Belgium: Mignolet – Alderweireld, Boyata, Vertonghen, Meunier (Carrasco 67), Vanaken (Onana 46), Witsel (Batshuayi 67), Castagne, Lukaku (Trossard 27), De Bruyne, E. Hazard (Mertens 46).
Netherlands: Cillessen – Timber, Van Dijk, Ake (De Ligt 74), Dumfries, Berghuis (Koopmeiners 83), F. De Jong, Klaassen, Blind, Bergwijn, Depay.

Jun 8 – Brussels
Belgium 6 (Witsel 42, De Bruyne 59, Trossard 73, 80, Dendoncker 83, Openda 90+3)
Poland 1 (Lewandowski 28)
Belgium: Mignolet – Dendoncker, Alderweireld, Vertonghen, Castagne (T. Hazard 84), Witsel (Faes 84), Tielemans, Carrasco, De Bruyne (De Ketelaere 75), E. Hazard (Trossard 66), Batshuayi (Openda 84).
Poland: Dragowski – Gumny, Glik, Bednarek, Puchacz (Bereszynski 46), Kaminski (Zalewski 81), Zurkowski, Krychowiak (D. Szymanski 46), Zielinski, S. Szymanski (Cash 66), Lewandowski (Buksa 69).

Jun 8 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Norrington-Davies 90+2)
Netherlands 2 (Koopmeiners 50, Weghorst 90+4)
Wales: Ward (A. Davies 46) – C. Roberts, Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies, Norrington-Davies, Levitt (Smith), Morrell (Colwill 59), Wilson, Johnson (Bale 77), James (Matondo 77).
Netherlands: Flekken – Teze, De Vrij, De Ligt (Martins Indi 84), Hateboer, Koopmeiners, Schouten (F. De Jong 67), Malacia, Lang (Til 90+1), Gakpo (Bergwijn 67), Weghorst.

Jun 11 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 2 (Klaassen 51, Dumfries 54)
Poland 2 (Cash 18, Zielinski 49)
Netherlands: Flekken – Timber (Teze 64), De Vrij, Ake, Dumfries, Berghuis (Koopmeiners 65), F. De Jong, Klaassen (Gakpo 65), Blind, Bergwijn (Weghorst 77), Depay.
Poland: Skorupski – Cash, Bednarek, Kiwior, Bereszynski, Frankowski (Glik 84), Krychowiak, Goralski (Zurkowski 58), Zielinski, Zalewski, Piatek.

Jun 11 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Johnson 86)
Belgium 1 (Tielemans 51)
Wales: Hennessey – C. Roberts (Norrington-Davies 61), Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies (Colwill 73), N. Williams, Ampadu, Allen (Ramsey 38), Wilson (Burns 73), James, Bale (Johnson 73).
Belgium: Casteels – Dendoncker, Boyata, Theate, Meunier, Witsel (Openda 90+3), Tielemans, Carrasco (T. Hazard 61), De Bruyne (E. Hazard 72), Trossard (Praet 72), Batshuayi.

Jun 14 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 3 (Lang 13, Gakpo 23, Depay 90+3)
Wales 2 (Johnson 26, Bale 90+2 pen)
Netherlands: Cillessen – Teze (De Vrij 46), De Ligt, Martins Indi, Hateboer (Dumfries 46), Koopmeiners, F. De Jong, Malacia, Lang (Bergwijn 73), Gakpo, Janssen (Depay 73).
Wales: Hennessey – Thomas, Mepham, Rodon (Gunter 67), B. Davies, Burns (C. Roberts 46), Smith (Ramsey 63), Ampadu, Wilson, Johnson, James (Bale 70).

Jun 14 – Warsaw
Poland 0
Belgium 1 (Batshuayi 16)
Poland: Szczesny – Cash, Wieteska (Grosicki 84), Glik, Kiwior, Zalewski (Frankowski 57), Zurkowski, Linetty (Goralski 84), Zielinski (Swiderski 57), S. Szymanski (Klich 70), Lewandowski.
Belgium: Mignolet – Dendoncker, Alderweireld, Vertonghen, Castagne, Witsel (Vanaken 46), Tielemans, T. Hazard (Foket 62), Mertens (De Ketelaere 80), Batshuayi (Openda 67), E. Hazard (Trossard 67).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Netherlands	4	3	1	0	11	6	10
Belgium	4	2	1	1	9	6	7
Poland	4	1	1	2	5	10	4
Wales	4	0	1	3	5	8	1

Group B1

Jun 4 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Spertsyan 74)
Republic of Ireland 0
Armenia: Yurchenko – Hambardzumyan, Mkoyan, Haroyan, A. Hovhannisyan (Mkrtchyan 61), K. Hovhannisyan, Bayramyan, Grigoryan, Spertsyan, Barseghyan (Dashyan 89), Bichakhchyan (Adamyan 56).
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Coleman (Keane 81), Collins, Duffy, Egan, Stevens (McClean 73), Hendrick, Cullen (Browne 81), Ogbene, Parrott (Obafemi 65), Robinson (Knight 73).

Jun 8 – Glasgow
Scotland 2 (Ralston 28, McKenna 40)
Armenia 0
Scotland: Gordon – Souttar, Hendry, McKenna, Ralston (Patterson 76), McGregor, McGinn, Robertson (Hickey 76), Armstrong (McTominay 75), Christie (Stewart 87), Adams (Brown 87).
Armenia: Yurchenko – Hambardzumyan, Mkoyan, Haroyan, A. Hovhannisyan, Bayramyan (Dashyan 89), Grigoryan (Angulo 46), Spertsyan (Udo 71), Barseghyan, K. Hovhannisyan (Voskanyan 46), Adamyan (Bichakhchyan 46).

Jun 8 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
Ukraine 1 (Tsygankov 49)
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Christie (Browne 69), Collins, Duffy, Egan (O'Shea 62), Stevens (McClean 69), Hendrick, Cullen, Robinson (Obafemi 69), Knight, Ogbene (Hamilton 78).
Ukraine: Lunin – Popov, Bondar, Syrota, Kacharaba (Karavaev 72), Sydorchuk (Ignatenko 88), Shaparenko, Mykolenko, Zubkov (Tsygankov 46), Mudryk (Pikhalyonok 72), Dovbyk (Sikan 80).

Jun 11 – Lodz
Ukraine 3 (Malinovskyi 61, Karavaev 77, Mykolenko 84)
Armenia 0
Ukraine: Pyatov – Karavaev, Zabarnyi, Matvienko, Zinchenko (Mykolenko 78), Sydorchuk (Ignatenko 85), Tsyganov, Malinovskyi, Mudryk (Zubkov 78), Shaparenko (Pikhalyonok 70), Yaremchuk (Dovbyk 70).
Armenia: Yurchenko – Monroy, Voskanyan, Mkoyan, Mkrtchyan, K. Hovhannisyan, Barseghyan (Harutyunyan 66), Dashyan (Malakyan 81), Udo, Bayramyan (Bichakhchyan 55), Babayan (Adamyan 55).

Jun 11 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 3 (Browne 20, Parrott 28, Obafemi 51)
Scotland 0
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Browne, Collins, Duffy, Egan, McClean, Cullen, Knight (Hourihane 72), Molumby (Hendrick 84), Obafemi (Hogan 56), Parrott (Robinson 85).
Scotland: Gordon – Hendry (Gilmour 46), Hanley, McKenna (Souttar 74), Ralston, McGregor, McTominay, Robertson, McGinn (Armstrong 59), Christie (Brown 59), Adams (Stewart 59).

Jun 14 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Bichakhchyan 6)
Scotland 4 (Armstrong 14, 45+1 McGinn 50, Adams 53)
Armenia: Yurchenko – Dashyan, Hambardzumyan, Haroyan, Mkoyan, A. Hovhannisyan, Grigoryan (Mkrtchyan 46), Spertysan (Angulo 59), Bayramyan (K. Hovhannisyan 59), Barseghyan (Serobyan 84), Bichakhchyan (Udo 59).
Sent off: A. Hovhannisyan 44, K. Hovhannisyan 90+1.
Scotland: Gordon – McTominay, Hanley (Campbell 86), Hendry, Patterson (Ralston 64), Gilmour (Ferguson 63), McGregor, Taylor, McGinn (Turnbull 64), Armstrong, Adams (Brown 74).

Jun 14 – Lodz
Ukraine 1 (Dovbyk 47)
Republic of Ireland 1 (Collins 31)
Ukraine: Riznyk – Karavaev, Zabarnyi, Matvienko (Popov 72), Mykolenko, Malinovskyi (Mudryk 28), Sydorchuk, Zinchenko, Yarmolenko, Shaparenko, Dovbyk (Sikan 73).
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Browne, Lenihan, Collins, O'Shea, McClean, Molumby (Hendrick 67), Cullen, Knight (Hourihane 67), Hogan (Robinson 56), Parrott (Ogbene 80).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ukraine	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
Scotland	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Rep. of Ireland	4	1	1	2	4	3	5
Armenia	4	1	0	3	2	9	4

Group B2

Jun 2 – Haifa
Israel 2 (Abada 25, Weissman 84)
Iceland 2 (Helgason 42, A. Sigurdsson 53)
Israel: Marciano – Dasa, Miguel Vitor, Goldberg, Leidner, Peretz (Glazer 74), Abu Fani (Jaber 61), Karzev (Baribo 73), Abada (Atzili 80), Solomon, Dabbur (Weissman 61).
Iceland: Runarsson – Sampsted, Br. Bjarnason (Olafsson 46), Gretarsson, Magnusson, Helgason, Bi. Bjarnason (Thrandarson 89), Haraldsson (Thordharson 78), A. Sigurdsson, Thorsteinsson (Anderson 78), S. Gudjonhsen (A. Gudmundsson 60).

Jun 6 – Reykjavik
Iceland 1 (Thorsteinsson 49)
Albania 1 (Seferi 30)
Iceland: Runarsson – Sampsted, Gretarsson, Magnusson, Olafsson, Helgason (Haraldsson 62), Bi. Bjarnason (Thrandarson 74), Johannesson, A. Sigurdsson (Ellertsson 74), Thorsteinsson (Anderson 62), A. Gudjonhsen (S. Gudjonhsen 90+2).
Albania: Berisha – Ismajli, Kumbulla, Djimsiti, Balliu (Veseli 82), Cekici (Asllani 73), Gjasula, Abrashi (Ramadani 79), Hysaj, Cikalleshi (Balaj 73), Seferi (Vrioni 73).

Jun 10 – Tirana
Albania 1 (Broja 45+2 pen)
Israel 2 (Solomon 57, 73)
Albania: Berisha – Ismajli, Djimsiti, Veseli (Cekici 84), Balliu, Abrashi (Vrioni 84), Bajrami (Gjasula 67), Asllani (Ramadani 59), Hysaj, Uzuni (Balaj 84), Broja.
Israel: Marciano – Dasa, Miguel Vitor, Goldberg, Leidner (Menachem 64), Peretz, Jaber, Karzev (Safouri 46), Abada, Solomon (Dabbur 81), Weissman (Glazer 90).

Jun 13 – Reykjavik
Iceland 2 (Thorsteinsson 9, Helgason 60)
Israel 2 (Gretarsson 35 og, Peretz 65)
Iceland: Runarsson – Sampsted, Gretarsson, Magnusson, Olafsson, Bi. Bjarnason (Thrandarson 79), A. Sigurdsson (Johannesson 61), Helgason (Gundmundsson 90), Haraldsson, Thorsteinsson (Thordarsson 79), A. Gudjonhsen (S. Gudjonhsen 62).
Israel: Marciano – Dasa, Miguel Vitor (Abu Abaid 78, Glazer 90+3), Goldberg, Leidner (Menachem 46), Safouri, Peretz, Jaber, Abada (Atzili 78), Solomon, Dabbur (Weissman 73).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Israel	3	1	2	0	6	5	5
Iceland	3	0	3	0	5	5	3
Albania	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Russia* (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Russia suspended and relegated to League C*

Group B3

Jun 4 – Helsinki
Finland 1 (Pukki 45+1 pen)
Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Prevljak 90+3)
Finland: Hradecky – Alho, L. Vaisanen, Ivanov, O'Shaugnessy, Uronen, Nissila (Taylor 61), Schuller (Lam 61), Kamara, Lod (Forss 78), Pukki (Kallman 78).
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sehic – Gazibegovic (Hotic 67), Ahmedhodzic, Hadzikadunic, Kolasinac, Hadziahmetovic (Prevljak 82), Pjanic (Gojak 56), Prcic, Stevanovic, Krunic (Menalo 57), Dzeko.

Jun 4 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Mugosa 66, Vukcevic 87)
Romania 0
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vesovic, Vujacic, Tomasevic, A. Vukcevic, Marusic (M. Vukcevic 80), Jankovic (Savicevic 84), Raickovic (Scekic 79), Jovovic (Bozovic 56), Haksabanovic (Radunovic 84), Mugosa.
Romania: Nita – Ratiu, Chiriches, Rus, Bancu, R. Marin (Cicaldau 78), Cristea (Cretu 13), Olaru (Maxim 46), Ivan, Mihaila (Mitrita 65), Tanase (Alibec 65).

Jun 7 – Helsinki
Finland 2 (Pohjanpalo 31, 37)
Montenegro 0
Finland: Hradecky – Granlund (Alho 79), L. Vaisanen, Ivanov, Jensen (S. Vaisanen 86), Niskanen, Lingman, Kamara (Schuller 67), Lod (Valakari 67), Pukki (Forss 67), Pohjanpalo.
Montenegro: Petkovic – Vujacic (Haksabanovic 67), Sipcic, Tomasevic, M. Vukcevic, Savicevic (Marusic 78), Vukotic (Bozovic 46), Radunovic, Scekic, Beciraj (Camaj 46), Duranovic (Sekulic 46).

Jun 7 – Zenica
Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Prevljak 68)
Romania 0
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sehic – Susic, Ahmedhodzic, Sanicanin, Civic (Kolasinac 67), Cimirot (Pjanic 46), Prcic (Hadziahmetovic 46), Gojak, Stevanovic (Besic 81), Duljevic, Dzeko (Prevljak 46).
Romania: Nita – Rus (Tanase 74), Chiriches, Burca, Manea (Hanca 81), R. Marin (Popescu 74), M. Marin, Camora, Maxim (Ivan 74), Cicaldau, Puscas (Alibec 74).

Jun 11 – Podgorica
Montenegro 1 (Marusic 77)
Bosnia-Herzegovina 1 (Menalo 62)
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vesovic (M. Vukcevic 90+2), Vujacic, Tomasevic, A. Vukcevic, Marusic, Raickovic (Bozovic 67), Jankovic (Scekic 79), Jovovic (Krstovic 67), Haksabanovic (Radunovic 90+1), Mugosa.
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sehic – Susic, Ahmedhodzic, Hadzikadunic, Kolasinac (Civic 68), Hotic (Menalo 46), Pjanic (Prevljak 61), Gojak, Hadziahmetovic, Krunic, Dzeko (Demirovic 79).

Jun 11 – Bucharest
Romania 1 (Bancu 30)
Finland 0
Romania: Nita – Ratiu, Chiriches, Burca, Bancu, Olaru (Cretu 69), M. Marin, Sorescu (Mihaila 80), Cicaldau (R. Marin 69), Popescu (Hanca 54), Puscas.
Finland: Joronen – Alho (Soisalo 68), L. Vaisanen (Kallman 80), Ivanov, O'Shaugnessy (Jensen 17), Uronen, Lod, Schuller, Kamara, Pukki (Nissila 68), Pohjanpalo.

Jun 14 – Zenica
Bosnia-Herzegovina 3 (Pjanic 5 pen, Dzeko 29, 58)
Finland 2 (Pukki 10, Kallman 18)
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sehic – Stevanovic, Ahmedhodzic (Kovacevic 73), Hadzikadunic, Kolasinac (Civic 68), Krunic, Pjanic (Gojak 77), Prcic (Hadziahmetovic, 46), Menalo, Duljevic (Milicevic 46), Dzeko.
Finland: Hradecky – Soisalo, S. Vaisanen (Ivanov 46), Tenho, Jensen, Niskanen (Taylor 81), Lingman, Schuller (Lod 59), Nissila (Kamara 46), Kallman (Pohjanpalo 73), Pukki.

Jun 14 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Montenegro 3 (Mugosa 42, 56, 63)
Romania: Nita – Manea, Chiriches, Burca, Bancu, R. Marin (Olaru 57), M. Marin (Paun 76), Maxim (Tanase 46), Stefanescu (Popescu 58), Mihaila (Sorescu 58), Puscas.
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vesovic, Tomasevic (Sipcic 88), Vujacic, Radunovic, Jankovic (Bozovic 63), Scekic (Raickovic 75), Jovovic (M. Vukcevic 46), Savicevic, Krstovic (Dukanovic 88), Mugosa.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bosnia-Herz	4	2	2	0	6	4	8
Montenegro	4	2	1	1	6	3	7
Finland	4	1	1	2	5	5	4
Romania	4	1	0	3	1	6	3

Group B4

Jun 2 – Belgrade
Serbia 0
Norway 1 (Haaland 26)
Serbia: Savic – Milenkovic, Veljkovic (Erakovic 75), Pavlovic, Lazovic (Zivkovic 69), Lukic (Grujic 69), Gudelj (Jovic 46), Kostic (Radonjic 69), Milinkovic-Savic, Tadic, A. Mitrovic.
Norway: Nyland – Pedersen, Strandberg, Ostigard, Meling, Aursnes (Thorstvedt 76), Elyounoussi (Ryersson 88), Odegaard, Berge (Daehli 75), King (Sorloth 46), Haaland (Thorsby 67).

Jun 2 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 0
Sweden 2 (Forsberg 39 pen, Kulusevski 88)
Slovenia: Oblak – Blazic, Bijol, Mevlja (Verbic 76), Stojanovic, Cerin, Kurtic, Sikosek (Karnicnik 65), Zajc (Lovric 65), Celar (Zahovic 82), Sporar (Sesko 46).
Sweden: Olsen – Andersson (Krafth 66), Starfelt (Milosevic 45+2), Nilsson, Augustinsson, Olsson (Svanberg 65), Karlstrom (Cajuste 79), Forsberg, Claesson, Kulusevski, Isak (Quaison 80).

Jun 5 – Belgrade
Serbia 4 (A. Mitrovic 24, Milinkovic-Savic 56, Jovic 86, Radonjic 90+2)
Slovenia 1 (Stojanovic 30)
Serbia: Rajkovic – Milenkovic, Masovic, S. Mitrovic, Zivkovic, Maksimovic, Ilic (Tadic 46), Ristic (Radonjic 46), Milinkovic-Savic (Lukic 72), Jovanovic (Jovic 46), A. Mitrovic (Racic 81).
Slovenia: Oblak – Stojanovic, Blazic, Bijol, Mevlja (Sikosek 79), Karnicnik, Lovric (Celar 79), Stankovic (Cerin 63), Kurtic, Zajc (Zahovic 84), Sesko (Sporar 63).

Jun 5 – Solna
Sweden 1 (Elanga 90+2)
Norway 2 (Haaland 20 pen, 69)
Sweden: Olsen – Krafth, Milosevic, Nilsson, Augustinsson, Svanberg, Cajuste (Karlstrom 78), Forsberg (Elanga 66), Claesson (Olsson 78), Kulusevski, Isak (Gyokeres 66).
Norway: Nyland – Pedersen (Hanche-Olsen 89), Strandberg, Ostigard, Meling, Odegaard, Berge (Hauge 89), Thorsby (Berg 61), Elyounoussi (Thorstvedt 75), Sorloth, Haaland (King 75).

Jun 9 – Oslo
Norway 0
Slovenia 0
Norway: Nyland – Pedersen, Hanche-Olsen, Ostigard, Meling (Bjorkan 73), Odegaard, Aursnes (Thorstvedt 46), Berge, Elyounoussi (Hauge 81), King (Sorloth 46), Haaland.
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik (Milec 81), Blazic, Brekalo (Mevlja 80), Sikosek, Stojanovic, Cerin, Kurtic, Verbic (Bijol 66), Celar (Crnigoj 66), Sesko (Sporar 66).
Sent off: Blazic 63.

Jun 9 – Solna
Sweden 0
Serbia 1 (Jovic 45)
Sweden: Olsen – Andersson, Ekdal, Nilsson (Kurtulus 41), Augustinsson, Cajuste, Svanberg, Olsson (Forsberg 77), Claesson (Gudmundsson 77), Elanga (Gyokeres 86), Quaison.
Serbia: Dmitrovic – Milenkovic, Veljkovic, Pavlovic (S. Mitrovic 79), Lazovic (Radonjic 63), Milinkovic-Savic, Gudelj, Terzic (Kostic 64), Tadic, Duricic (Racic 70), Jovic (Lukic 77).

Jun 12 – Oslo
Norway 3 (Haaland 10, 54 pen, Sorloth 77)
Sweden 2 (Forsberg 62, Gyokeres 90)
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson (Pedersen 66), Strandberg, Ostigard, Bjorkan, Berge, Thorsby (Berg 66), Odegaard (Thorstvedt 66), Sorloth, Daehli (Elyounoussi 57), Haaland (Berisha 89).
Sweden: Olsen – Krafth, Ekdal, Kurtulus (Papagiannopoulos 85), Gudmundsson, Cajuste (Eriksson 83), Karlstrom (Claesson 58), Forsberg, Kulusevski, Quaison (Elanga 58), Isak (Gyokeres 58).

Jun 12 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Cerin 48, Sesko 53)
Serbia 2 (Zivkovic 8, A. Mitrovic 35)
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Bijol, Mevlja (Stankovic 84), Brekalo (Balkovec 46), Sikosek (Verbic 78), Zajc (Crnigoj 46), Cerin, Kurtic, Celar (Sporar 46), Sesko.
Serbia: Savic – Milenkovic, Veljkovic, Pavlovic, Zivkovic (Radonjic 46), Maksimovic (Racic 85), Grujic (Milinkovic-Savic, 65), Mladenovic (Jovic 56), Tadic, Lukic (Kostic 57), A. Mitrovic.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway	4	3	1	0	6	3	10
Serbia	4	2	1	1	7	4	7
Sweden	4	1	0	3	5	6	3
Slovenia	4	0	2	2	3	8	2

Group C1

Jun 4 – Vilnius
Lithuania 0
Luxembourg 2 (Sinani 44, 78)
Lithuania: Setkus – Baravykas, Satkus, Utkus, Barauskas, Megelaitis, Slivka (Dolznikov 84), Novikovas, Golubickas (Petkevicius 63), Lasickas, A. Klimavicius (Kruzickas 63).
Luxembourg: Moris – M. Martins, Chanot, Carlson, Pinto, V. Thill (Rodrigues 46), Barreiro, C. Martins, Borges Sanches (Olesen 60), Muratovic (Bohnert 69), Sinani (S. Thill 89).

Jun 4 – Istanbul
Turkey 4 (Under 37, Dervisoglu 47, Dursun 82, Demiral 85)
Faroe Islands 0
Turkey: Cakir – Muldur, Demiral, Soyuncu (Sinik 46), Kadioglu, Under (Akgun 80), Tokoz (Ozcan 66), Calhanoglu, Akturkoglu (Ayhan 46), Unal, Dervisoglu (Dursun 65).
Faroe Islands: Nielsen – Joensen, Faro, Askham, Davidsen, Rolantsson (Agnarsson 53), S. Vatnhamar, G. Vatnhamar (Edmundsson 86), Hansson (Mikkelsen 86), Jonsson (Andreasen 53), Johannesen (Olsen 53).

Jun 7 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 0
Luxembourg 1 (Rodrigues 74 pen)
Faroe Islands: Nielsen – Joensen, Faro, Askham (Nattestad 60), Davidsen, Rolantsson, S. Vatnhamar, G. Vatnhamar (Andreasen 85), M. Olsen (Jonsson 86), Hansson (Mikkelsen 78), K. Olsen (Agnarsson 78).
Sent off: Joensen 67, S. Vatnhamar 80.
Luxembourg: Moris – M. Martins, Chanot, Carlson, Pinto, Barreiro, C. Martins, Olesen (Gerson 90+4), Sinani, Rodrigues (Bohnert 90+3), Borges Sanches (S. Thill 86).

Jun 7 – Vilnius
Lithuania 0
Turkey 6 (Sinik 2, 14, Dursun 56 pen, 81, Akgun 89, Dervisoglu 90)
Lithuania: Setkus – Mikoliunas, L. Klimavicius, Satkus, Sirvys, Armanavicius, Megelaitis (Utkus 46), Novikovas (Petkevicius 64), Golubickas (Barauskas 76), Dolznikov (Cernych 46), Laukzemis (A. Klimavicius 65).
Turkey: Alemdar – Muldur, Kabak (Ozkacar 76), Ayhan, Kadioglu (Elmali 58), Under (Akgun 46), Ozcan, Calhanoglu (Kokcu 46), Sinik (Akturkoglu 66), Dervisoglu, Dursun.

Jun 11 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 2 (Davidsen 20 pen, Andreasen 45)
Lithuania 1 (Cernych 6)
Faroe Islands: Nielsen – Rolantsson, Faro (Nattestad 67), Askham (Vatnsdal 25), Davidsen, Bjartalio, G. Vatnhamar, Andreasen (Hansson 66), M. Olsen (Jonsson 67), K. Olsen, Johanesson (Edmundsson 83).
Lithuania: Bartkus – Baravykas (Kruzickas 82), Utkus, L. Klimavicius, Barauskas (Sirvys 46), Slivka, Megelaitis (Armanavicius 82), Lasickas (Milasius 71), Cernych, Novikovas, A. Klimavicius (Laukzemis 64).

Jun 11 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Turkey 2 (Calhanoglu 37 pen, Dursun 76)
Luxembourg: Moris – M. Martins (Bohnert 81), Chanot, Carlson, Pinto, C. Martins (Omosanya 81), Rodrigues, Olesen (S. Thill 46), Barreiro, Borges Sanches (V. Thill 54), Sinani (Gerson 81).
Turkey: Cakir – Celik, Demiral, Soyuncu, Kadioglu (Elmali 68), Kokcu (Dursun 46), Tokoz (Kutlu 81), Calhanoglu (Ozcan 68), Under, Sinik, Dervisoglu (Akturkoglu 68).

Jun 14 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 2 (Rodrigues 12 pen, Barreiro 49)
Faroe Islands 2 (Bjartalio 56, 59)
Luxembourg: Moris – M. Martins, Chanot (Ikene 75), Carlson, Pinto, Gerson (C. Martins 46), Bohnert (Deville 67), Barreiro, S. Thill (Borges Sanches 68), Rodrigues, Sinani.
Faroe Islands: Nielsen – Rolantsson (Hansen 89), Vatnsdal (Baldvinsson 60), Nattestad, Davidsen, Bjartalio (Mikkelsen 89), Joensen, G. Vatnhamar, Hansson, M. Olsen (Jonsson 73), K. Olsen (Edmundsson 46).

Jun 14 – Izmir
Turkey 2 (Ayhan 37, Calhanoglu 54 pen)
Lithuania 0
Turkey: Bayindir – Celik, Ayhan, Soyuncu, Kadioglu (Muldur 84), Under (Cukur 84), Ozcan, Calhanoglu (Kabak 84), Akturkoglu (Sinik 62), Dervisoglu (Akgun 62), Dursun.
Lithuania: Bartkus – Baravykas (Sirvys 46), Girdvainis, L. Klimavicius (Satkus 78), Barauskas, Milasius (Tutyskinas 85), Golubickas (A. Klimavicius 71), Megelaitis, Uzela, Lasickas (Armanavicius 46), Cernych.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkey	4	4	0	0	14	0	12
Luxembourg	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Faroe Islands	4	1	1	2	4	8	4
Lithuania	4	0	0	4	1	12	0

Group C2

Jun 2 – Larnaca
Cyprus 0
Kosovo 2 (Berisha 65, Zhegrova 78)
Cyprus: Michael – Kyriakou (Katelaris 66), Gogic, Panagiotou, Antoniou (Panayiotou 67), Artymatas, Kastanos, Papoulis (Pittas 67), Ioannou (Kakoullis 76), Tzionis (Loizou 71), Sotiriou.
Kosovo: Muric – Kastrati, Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Aliti, Idrizi (Loshaj 71), Fazliji, Berisha (Dresevic 76), Zhegrova, Rashica (Bytyqi 87), Muriqi.

Jun 2 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Greece 1 (Bakasetas 39)
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Bradley (McGinn 62), McNair, Evans, Ballard, Lane (Hume 78), A. McCann, Davis, Saville (S. Charles 79), Lavery (Lafferty 62), Whyte (D. Charles 71).
Greece: Vlachodimos, Rota (Baldock 90+2), Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos, Tsimikas, Siopis (Tzavellas 82), Bouchalakis, Limnios (Pavlidis 69), Bakasetas (Kourbelis 69), Mantalos, Giakoumakis (Chatzigiovanis 69).

Jun 5 – Larnaca
Cyprus 0
Northern Ireland 0
Cyprus: Michael – Katelaris (Panagiotou 46), Gogic, Korrea, Pittas, Loizou (Tzionis 56), Artymatas, Kastanos (Papoulis 66), Ioannou, Christofi (Kyriakou 65), Sotiriou (Kakoullis 77).
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – McNair, Evans, Brown, Lane (Spencer 64), S. Charles (Donnelly 64), Whyte (McMenamin 64), Davis (Lavery 77), Saville (A. McCann 70), McGinn, Lafferty.

Jun 5 – Prishtina
Kosovo 0
Greece 1 (Bakasetas 36)
Kosovo: Muric – Kastrati, Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Aliti, Loshaj (Berisha 75), Fazliji (Dresevic 75), Zhegrova (Ujkani 90+2), Zeneli (Kololli 57), Rashica (Bytyqi 57), Muriqi.
Sent off: Aliti 72, Muric 90+1.
Greece: Vlachodimos, Baldock, Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos, Tsimikas, Bakasetas, Kourbelis (Siopis 56), Mantalos (Bouchalakis 86), Limnios, Masouras (Douvikas 78), Giakoumakis (Pavlidis 57).

Jun 9 – Volos
Greece 3 (Bakasetas 8, Pavlidis 20, Limnios 48)
Cyprus 0
Greece: Vlachodimos, Baldock, Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos (Tzavellas 24), Tsimikas, Bakasetas (Papanikolaou 81), Siopis (Alexandropoulos 52), Mantalos (Kourbelis 52), Limnios, Douvikas (Masouras 46), Pavlidis.
Cyprus: Michael – Katelaris (Laifis 46), Gogic, Korrea, Pittas, Kyriakou, Artymatas, Ioannou (Panagiotou 64), Loizou (Tzionis 64), Papoulis (Spoljaric 74), Sotiriou (Christofi 46).

Jun 9 – Prishtina
Kosovo 3 (Muriqi 9 pen, 52, Bytyqi 19)
Northern Ireland 2 (Lavery 44, Ballard 83)
Kosovo: Ujkani – Kastrati, Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Rrudhani (Fazliji 75), Berisha (Domgjoni 79), Dresevic, Muslija, Rashica (Sahiti 89), Bytyqi, Muriqi.
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Spencer (Bradley 86), Ballard, Evans, Brown, Lavery (Whyte 68), Davis, Saville (Thompson 73), McMenamin, A. McCann (S. Charles 68), Lafferty (D. Charles 68).

Jun 12 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 2 (McNair 71, Evans 90)
Cyprus 2 (Kakoullis 32, 51)
Northern Ireland: Carson – Spencer (Bradley 69), Ballard, Evans, Brown, Lavery (Whyte 59), McNair, Davis, S. Charles (Thompson 59), McMenamin (McGinn 69), Lafferty (D. Charles 69).
Cyprus: Christodoulou – Artymatas, Gogic, Laifis (Ioannou 69), Pittas (Panayiotou 46), Kyriakou, Kastanos, Panagiotou, Christofi, Tzionis (Papoulis 58), Kakoullis (Katelaris 78).

Jun 12 – Volos
Greece 2 (Giakoumakis 71, Mantalos 90)
Kosovo 0
Greece: Vlachodimos, Baldock, Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos, Tsimikas, Bakasetas (Giannoulis 85), Siopis, Bouchalakis (Kourbelis 77), Chatzigiovanis (Mantalos 46), Masouras (Alexandropoulos 85), Pavlidis (Giakoumakis 58).
Kosovo: Muric – Domgjoni, Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Aliti, Bytyqi (Zeneli 76), Berisha, Muslija (Idrizi 58), Rrudhani (Loshaj 46), Rashica (Sahiti 90), Muriqi.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Greece	4	4	0	0	7	0	12
Kosovo	4	2	0	2	5	5	6
N. Ireland	4	0	2	2	4	6	2
Cyprus	4	0	2	2	2	7	2

Group C3

Jun 3 – Nur-Sultan
Kazakhstan 2 (Aymbetov 50, 60)
Azerbaijan 0
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Kairov, Akhmetov (Maliy 80), Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy, Baytana (Orazov 46), Tagybergen (Zharynbetov 86), Darabayev, Astanov (Kuat 73), Aymbetov (Shushenachev 79).
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – B. Huseynov (Baymramov 79), Mustafazade, Haqqverdi, Israfilov, Medvedev, Mahmudov (Nazarov 79), Isaev (Nuriyev 68), Salahli, Emreli (Saydayev 79), Dadasov (Alaskarov 68).

Jun 3 – Novi-Sad
Belarus 0
Slovakia 1 (Suslov 61)
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Begunov, Khadarkevich, Politevich, Yudenkov, Shevchenko, Klimovich (Bessmertny 71), Bocherov (Grechikho 82), Yablonskiy (Bykov 62), Ebong (Malkevich 72), Bakhar (Solovey 71).
Slovakia: Rodak – Pekarik, Satka, Skriniar, De Marco, Lobotka (Herc 89), Schranz (Suslov 59), Kucka (Hrosovsky 75), Duda (Rusnak 60), Weiss, Almasi (Bozenik 75).

Jun 6 – Novi-Sad
Belarus 0
Azerbaijan 0
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Nechaev, Khadarkevich, Politevich, Volkov (Ebong 33), Shevchenko, Bocherov (Klimovich 61), Yablonskiy (Bessmertny 82), Bykov, Malkevich (Pechenin 82), Solovey (Gromyko 61).
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – C. Huseynov, Mustafazade, Haqqverdi, Israfilov, Medvedev (Aliyev 65), Mahmudov, Almeyda (Qarayev 75), Salahli, Dadasov (Alaskarov 59), Saydayev (Emreli 59).
Sent off: Aliyev 84.

Jun 6 – Trnava
Slovakia 0
Kazakhstan 1 (Darabayev 26)
Slovakia: Rodak – Koscelnik (Strelec 83), Gyomber, Skriniar (Valjent 43), Chvatal, Lobotka, Schranz (Haraslin 46), Rusnak (Bozenik 71), Kucka, Weiss (Suslov 46), Almasi.
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Gabyshev (Kairov 66), Maliy, Marochkin, Alip, Dosmagambetov, Darabayev (Zharynbetov 73), Kuat, Astanov (Vasiljev 73), Orazov (Vorogovskiy 59), Aymbetov (Shushenachev 65).

Jun 10 – Mardakan
Azerbaijan 0
Slovakia 1 (Weiss 81)
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – C. Huseynov, Mustafazade, Haqqverdi, Israfilov, Medvedev (B. Huseynov 65), Mahmudov (A. Huseynov 79), Almeyda (Qarayev 55), Salahli, Dadasov (Emreli 46), Saydayev (Nuriyev 65).
Slovakia: Rodak – Pekarik, Satka, Valjent, De Marco, Suslov (Weiss 65), Lobotka (Bero 75), Hrosovsky, Haraslin, Rusnak (Schranz 90+2), Strelec (Duda 65).

Jun 10 – Novi-Sad
Belarus 1 (Malkevich 84)
Kazakhstan 1 (Aymbetov 13)
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Khadarkevich, Volkov, Yudenkov (Gromyko 46), Begunov (Shevchenko 76), Bykov, Yablonskiy (Klimovich 81), Ebong, Pechenin, Bakhar (Malkevich 65), Sedko (Bogomolskiy 46).
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Kairov, Maliy, Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy (Suyumbayev 59), Darabayev (Dosmagambetov 77), Kuat, Orazov (Zharynbetov 67), Astanov (Vasiljev 77), Aymbetov (Shushenachev 68).

Jun 13 – Nur-Sultan
Kazakhstan 2 (Vorogovskiy 18, Astanov 39)
Slovakia 1 (Bero 51)
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Gabyshev (Kairov 73), Maliy, Marochkin, Alip, Dosmagambetov, Astanov (Logvinenko 84), Darabayev (Erlanov 88), Tagybergen, Vorogovskiy (Orazov 74), Aymbetov (Samorodov 88).
Slovakia: Rodak – Pekarik, Gyomber, Valjent, Chvatal (De Marco 46), Kucka, Hrosovsky, Bero (Almasi 82), Haraslin (Suslov 88), Rusnak (Strelec 72), Duda.
Sent off: Duda 87.

Jun 13 – Mardakan
Azerbaijan 2 (Emreli 76, Seydayev 90+3)
Belarus 0
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – C. Huseynov, Mustafazade, B. Huseynov, A. Huseynov (Alaskarov 73), Mahmudov, Israfilov (Diniyev 59), Almeyda (Isaev 73), Salahli (Krivotsyuk 59), Dadasov (Emreli 59), Saydayev.
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Shevchenko (Bessmertny 86), Politevich, Khadarkevich, Pechenin, Malkevich, Yablonskiy, Bocherov (Gromyko 57), Ebong, Klimovich (Bykov 57), Bakhar (Bogomolskiy 70).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kazakhstan	4	3	1	0	6	2	10
Slovakia	4	2	0	2	3	3	6
Azerbaijan	4	1	1	2	2	3	4
Belarus	4	0	2	2	1	4	2

Group C4

Jun 2 – Tbilisi
Georgia 4 (Kvaratskhelia 12, Kashia 33, Mikautadze 87, Qazaishvili 88)
Gibraltar 0
Georgia: Loria – Kakabadze, Kashia (Kobakhidze 63), Khocholava, Lohzhanidze, Mekvabishvili, Aburjania (Kiteishvili 63), Tsitaishvili (Giorbelidze 40), Chakvetadze (Kvekveskiri 78), Kvaratskhelia (Qazaishvili 63), Mikautadze.
Gibraltar: Coleing – Jolley (Valarino 66), R. Chipolina, Lopes, Wiseman, Britto, Walker (Hernandez 73), Ronan (Torrilla 46), Annesley (Mouelhi 66), Casciaro, Styche (Coombes 46).

Jun 2 – Razgrad
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 13)
North Macedonia 1 (M. Ristovski 50)
Bulgaria: Mihaylov – Turtisov, P. Hristov, A. Hristov, Nedyalkov, Krastev (Kostadinov 59), Chochev, Milanov (M. Minchev 87), Nedelev (Stefanov 71), Despodov, Iliev (G. Minchev 46).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ashkovski, Velkovski (Ristevski 88), Musliu, Alioski, Spirovski (Nikolov 72), Bardhi, Churlinov (Da. Babunski 46), Elmas, Trajkovski (Miovski 46), M. Ristovski (Do. Babunski 73).

Jun 5 – Gibraltar
Gibraltar 0
North Macedonia 2 (Bardhi 21, Nikolov 84)
Gibraltar: Coleing – Valarino (Casciaro 78), Jolley, Wiseman, Lopes, Mascarenhas-Olivero, Torrilla, Annesley, Britto, Walker (Pozo 87), Styche (Coombes 65).
North Macedonia: Iliev – Todorski, Serafimov, Musliu, Alioski (Ashkovski 66), Spirovski (Ristevski 46), Nikolov, Elmas (Da. Babunski 65), Bardhi, Trajkovski (Miovski 57), M. Ristovski (Do. Babunski 57).

Jun 5 – Razgrad
Bulgaria 2 (Iliev 50, Stefanov 83)
Georgia 5 (Davitashvili 4, A. Hristov 31 og, Zivzivadze 52, Kvaratskhelia 58 pen, Qazaishvili 69)
Bulgaria: Mihaylov – Turtisov (Popov 64), A. Hristov, Nedyalkov, Jordanov (P. Hristov 46), Chochev, Milanov (Stefanov 46), M. Minchev (Yankov 64), Nedelev (Krastev 64), Despodov, Iliev.
Georgia: Loria – Kakabadze (Kiteishvili 84), Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Khocholava, Azarovi, Kvekveskiri, Aburjania (Gvilia 75), Davitashvili (Mamuchashvili 74), Kvaratskhelia (Qazaishvili 67), Zivzivadze (Mikautadze 67).

Jun 9 – Gibraltar
Gibraltar 1 (Walker 61 pen)
Bulgaria 1 (G. Minchev 45)
Gibraltar: Coleing – Wiseman, R. Chipolina, Lopes, Mascarenhas-Olivero, Valarino (Ronan 85), Torrilla (Mouelhi 80), Annesley, Britto (Styche 75), Walker, Casciaro.
Bulgaria: Vutsov – Popov, Chorbadzhiyski, P. Hristov, Jordanov, Milanov, Kraev, Krastev (Iliev 83), M. Minchev (Despodov 71), G. Minchev, Stefanov (Nedelev 72).

Jun 9 – Skopje
North Macedonia 0
Georgia 3 (Zivzivadze 52, Kvaratskhelia 62, Kiteishvili 84)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ashkovski, Velkovski, Musliu, Alioski, Churlinov, Spirovski (Miovski 71), Bardhi, Trajkovski (Nikolov 60), Elmas (Todorski 79), M. Ristovski (Da. Babunski 71).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze (Lobzhanidze 83), Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Khocholava, Tsitaishvili, Davitashvili (Mamuchashvili 71), Kvekveskiri, Aburjania (Kiteishvili 61), Kvaratskhelia (Qazaishvili 83), Zivzivadze (Mikautadze 71).

Jun 12 – Tbilisi
Georgia 0
Bulgaria 0
Georgia: Loria – Lobzhanidze, Khocholava, Kashia, Dvali, Azarovi (Kiteishvili 63), Mekabishvili (Davitashvili 63), Kvekveskiri, Kvaratskhelia, Qazaishvili (Tsitaishvili, 52), Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 80).
Bulgaria: Mihaylov – Turtisov, Galabov, Chorbadzhiyski, Nedyalkov, M. Minchev (Chochev 85), Kraev, Kostadinov, Milanov, Stefanov (Malinov 65), Iliev (G. Minchev 51).

Jun 12 – Skopje
North Macedonia 4 (Bardhi 4, Torrilla 14 og, Miovski 16, Chrulinov 31)
Gibraltar 0
N. Macedonia: Shishkovski – Serafimov, Zajkov, Ristevski, Todorski, Nikolov, Elmas (Gorzdanovski 80), Alioski (Ethemi 46), Bardhi (Fazlagikj 46), Churlinov (Dimoski 46), Miovski (Do. Babunski 62).
Gibraltar: Banda – Wiseman, R. Chipolina (Sergeant 60), Lopes, Mascarenhas-Olivero, Valarino (Jolley 74), Torrilla (Ronan 46), Annesley, Britto (J. Chipolina 60), Walker, Casciaro (Styche 59).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Georgia	4	3	1	0	12	2	10
North Macedonia	4	2	1	1	7	4	7
Bulgaria	4	0	3	1	4	7	3
Gibraltar	4	0	1	3	1	11	1

Group D1

Jun 3 – Riga
Latvia 3 (Uldrikis 9, 77, J. Ikaunieks 85 pen)
Andorra 0
Latvia: Steinbors – Savalnieks, Cernomordijs, Dubra, Jurkovskis, J. Ikaunieks (D. Ikaunieks 86), Tobers, Zjuzins (Emsis 86), Ciganiks (Jaunzems 67), Uldrikis, Gutkovskis (Krollis 75).
Andorra: Gomes – C. Rubio, Llovera, C. Garcia, Alavedra (X. Vieira 86), M. Garcia, Rebes (M. Vieira 78), Vales, Cervos (Bernat 78), Alaez (J. Rubio 90), Berto (Sanchez 86).

Jun 3 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Moldova 2 (Nicolaescu 5 pen, Bolohan 90+1)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Grunenfelder, Malin, S. Wolfinger, Graber (Brandle 83), Sele, Luchinga (Beck 72), Meier (Netzer 72), Yildiz (N. Frick 62), Hasler, Y. Frick (F. Wolfinger 62).
Moldova: Railean – Posmac (Craciun 57), Bolohan, Armas, Revenco, Rata, M. Platica (Dros 57), Reabciuk, Caimacov (Stina 85), Iosipoi (Mandricenco 46), Nicolaescu (S. Platica 83).

Jun 6 – Riga
Latvia 1 (Zjuzins 73)
Liechtenstein 0
Latvia: Steinbors – Savalnieks, Cernomordijs, Dubra, Jurkovskis, Jaunzems (Ciganiks 57), Emsis (Zjuzins 57), Tobers, J. Ikaunieks (D. Ikaunieks 85), Uldrikis, Gutkovskis (Krollis 85).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Grunenfelder, Malin, S. Wolfinger, Graber (Brandle 64), Sele, Beck (Yildiz 77), Netzer (M. Wolfinger 54), Hasler, Meier (N. Frick 78), Y. Frick (F. Wolfinger 54).

Jun 6 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Moldova 0
Andorra: Gomes – De Pablos, Llovera, C. Garcia, Vales (Alavedra 12), Cervos, X. Vieira, M. Vieira (Rebes 46), J. Rubio (Berto 58), Alaez (Bernat 86), Cucu (A. Martinez 58).
Moldova: Railean – Posmac, Bolohan (Dros 46), Armas, Revenco, Rata, M. Platica (Cojocaru 61), Reabciuk, Mandricenco (S. Platica 46), Stina, Nicolaescu.
Sent off: Stina 44.

Jun 10 – Chisinau
Moldova 2 (Nicolaescu 5 pen, Motpan 64)
Latvia 4 (Gutkovskis 19, 60, J. Ikaunieks 26, 75)
Moldova: Railean – Revenco, Posmac (Craciun 65), Bolohan, Armas, Reabciuk, Rata, Caimacov, M. Platica (Motpan 53), S. Platica (Cojocaru 80), Nicolaescu (Cobet 80).
Latvia: Steinbors – Savalnieks, Cernomordijs, Dubra, Jurkovskis, J. Ikaunieks, Zjuzins (Emsis 80), Tobers (Tarasovs 90+2), Ciganiks (Jaunzems 61), Uldrikis (Krollis 61), Gutkovskis (D. Ikaunieks 79).

Jun 10 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 2 (Alaez 78 pen, C. Rubio 82)
Liechtenstein 1 (Meier 90)
Andorra: Gomes – C. Rubio, Llovera, Alavedra, Cervos, Alaez (Clemente 86), Rebes, X. Vieira (M. Vieira 79), Bernat (M. Garcia 79), Berto (Lima 86), Pujol (Cucu 58).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Grunenfelder, Malin, S. Wolfinger (Meier 40), Graber (Yildiz 89), Sele (N. Frick 46), Luchinger, Netzer (Marxer 77), Beck, Hasler, Y. Frick (Kollmann 77).

Jun 14 – Chisinau
Moldova 2 (Caimacov 26 pen, Nicolaescu 50 pen)
Andorra 1 (M. Vieira 45)
Moldova: Railean – Jardan (Revenco 53), Craciun, Bolohan (Posmac 61), Armas, Reabciuk, Rata, Caimacov, Motpan, Cojocaru (S. Platica 61), Nicolaescu (Cobet 78).
Andorra: Alvarez – C. Rubio, Llovera, C. Garcia, Alavedra, M. Garcia (Pujol 80), M. Vieira (Bernat 87), Rebes, J. Rubio (Cervos 55), Cucu (Berto 54), Clemente (Alaez 54).

Jun 14 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Latvia 2 (Gutkovskis 20, 28)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Grunenfelder, Malin, Beck, Meier, Sele (Gassner 78), Luchinger (Marxer 65), Netzer (F. Wolfinger 65), Hasler, N. Frick (Brandle 77), Y. Frick (Yildiz 46).
Latvia: Steinbors – Savalnieks, Cernomordijs, Dubra, Jurkovskis, J. Ikaunieks, Zjuzins (Emsis 80), Tobers (Tarasovs 90+2), Ciganiks (Jaunzems 61), Uldrikis (Krollis 61), Gutkovskis (D. Ikaunieks 79).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Latvia	4	4	0	0	10	2	12
Moldova	4	2	1	1	6	5	7
Andorra	4	1	1	2	3	6	4
Liechtenstein	4	0	0	4	1	7	0

Group D2

Jun 2 – Tallinn
Estonia 2 (Kirss 24, Tamm 32)
San Marino 0
Estonia: Hein – Kuusk (Paskotsi 69), Tamm, Mets, Zenjov (Teniste 85), Vassiljev (Puri 85), Kreida (Miller 46), Kait, Sinyavskiy, Kirss, Sorga (Anier 69).
San Marino: Benedettini – Ma. Battistini (D'Addario 21), Palazzi, Fabbri, Zafferani (Hirsch 57), Golinucci (D. Tomassini 89), Mi. Battistini, Mularoni, Grandoni (Rinaldi 57), Vitaioli (Cevoli 57), Nanni.

Jun 5 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Malta 2 (Busuttil 59, Guillaumier 75)
San Marino: Benedettini – Cevoli, Rossi, Palazzi, D'Addario (Zafferani 68), Lunadei, Mi. Battistini (Censoni 85), Golinucci, Ceccaroli (F. Tomassini 68), Rinaldi (Hirsch 80), Nanni (Bernardi 85).
Malta: Bonello – S. Borg, Pepe (Apap 90), J. Borg (Z. Muscat 69), J. Mbong (Corbalan 46), Guillaumier (N. Muscat 88), Vella (Busuttil 46), Overend, Paiber, Satariano, Degabriele.

Jun 9 – Ta' Qali
Malta 1 (Hein 56 og)
Estonia 2 (Vassiljev 21, Anier 90)
Malta: Bonello – S. Borg, Pepe, J. Borg (Z. Muscat 85), J. Mbong, Guillaumier (Vella 80), Paiber, Camenzuli, Teuma, Satariano (Montebello 69), Degabriele (Gambin 80).
Estonia: Hein – Paskotsi, Tamm, Mets, Teniste, Vassiljev (Miller 90+6), Soomets, Kait, Kallaste, Kirss (Zenjov 60), Sorga (Anier 60).

Jun 12 – Ta' Qali
Malta 1 (Z. Muscat 50)
San Marino 0
Malta: Bonello – Apap (J. Borg 79), Pepe, Z. Muscat, J. Mbong, Guillaumier, Paiber (Vella 78), Camenzuli, Teuma, Montebello (Satariano 87), Gambin (Degabriele 71).
San Marino: Benedettini – D'Addario (Zafferani 79), Palazzi, Rossi, Fabbri, Grandoni (Rinaldi 61), Lunadei (Vitaioli 85), Mi. Battistini, D. Tomassini (Mularoni 61), Nanni, Ceccaroli (Hirsch 79).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Estonia	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Malta	3	2	0	1	4	2	6
San Marino	3	0	0	3	0	5	0

2022-23 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1

Jun 4 – Paramaribo
Suriname 1 (Knight 84 og)
Jamaica 1 (Flemmings 39)

Jun 7 – Kingston
Jamaica 3 (Morrison 16, Flemmings 43, J. Lowe 70)
Suriname 1 (Wildschut 21)

Jun 11 – Torreon
Mexico 3 (Reyes 4, Martin 40 pen, Sanchez 90+4)
Suriname 0

Jun 14 – Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Bailey 4)
Mexico 1 (Romo 45+3)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamaica	3	1	2	0	5	3	5
Mexico	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Suriname	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group A2

Jun 2 – Panama City
Panama 2 (Diaz 52, Waterman 75)
Costa Rica 0

Jun 5 – SanJose
Costa Rica 2 (Campbell 28, Calvo 88)
Martinique 0

Jun 9 – Panama City
Panama 5 (Torres 6, Vitulin 15 og, Escobar 56, Barcenas 85, 90+3)
Martinique 0

Jun 12 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 0
Panama 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panama	3	2	1	0	7	0	7
Costa Rica	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Martinique	3	0	1	2	0	7	1

Group A3

Jun 3 – Willemstad
Curacao 0
Honduras 1 (Pinto 23)

Jun 6 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 1 (Quioto 90+4)
Curacao 2 (L. Bacuna 34, Van den Hurk 82)

Jun 9 – Vancouver
Canada 4 (Davies 27 pen, 71, Vitoria 42, Cavalini 85)
Curacao 0

Jun 13 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 2 (K. Lopez 13, Arriaga 78)
Canada 1 (David 86)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Honduras	3	2	0	1	4	3	6
Canada	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Curacao	3	1	0	2	2	6	3

Group A4

Jun 4 – San Salvador
El Salvador 3 (Bonilla 2, 43, Paterson 55 og)
Grenada 1 (McQueen 4)

Jun 7 – St. George's
Grenada 2 (Berkeley-Agyepong 29, Charles 54)
El Salvador 2 (Larin 35 pen, Gil 88)

Jun 10 – Austin
United States 5 (Ferreira 43, 54, 56, 78, Arriola 62)
Grenada 0

Jun 14 – San Salvador
El Salvador 1 (Larin 35)
United States 1 (Morris 90+1)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
El Salvador	3	1	2	0	6	4	5
United States	2	1	1	0	6	1	4
Grenada	3	0	1	2	3	10	1

Group B1

Jun 2 – Gros Islet
Barbados 0
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Philip 90+1)

Jun 2 – Les Abymes
Guadeloupe 2 (Gendrey 15, Ambrose 90)
Cuba 1 (M. Reyes 74)

Jun 5 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 3 (Pozo 35, A. Hernandez 38, Paradela 47 pen)
Barbados 0

Jun 5 – Basseterre
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Weston 55)
Guadeloupe 0

Jun 9 – Gros Islet
Barbados 0
Guadeloupe 1 (Ambrose 16)

Jun 9 – Basseterre
Antigua & Barbuda 0
Cuba 2 (Paradela 16, O. Hernandez 83)

Jun 12 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 3 (A. Hernandez 16, 21, 63)
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Bishop 51)

Jun 12 – Les Abymes
Guadeloupe 2 (Ambrose 6, Phaeton 27)
Barbados 1 (Atkins 59)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cuba	4	3	0	1	9	3	9
Guadeloupe	4	3	0	1	5	3	9
Antigua & Barbuda	4	2	0	3	3	5	6
Barbados	4	0	0	4	1	7	0

Group B2

Jun 4 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 0
Haiti 0

Jun 4 – Santo Domingo
Montserrat 1 (Clifton 21)
Guyana 2 (Glasgow 61, 71)

Jun 7 – Leonora
Guyana 2 (Bobb 35, Glasgow 45+2)
Bermuda 1 (Leverock 42)

Jun 7 – Santo Domingo
Haiti 3 (Prunier 5, Antoine 9, Saba 25)
Montserrat 2 (Strawbridge 19, Tayor 90+2)

Jun 11 – Leonora
Guyana 2 (Welshman 11, Moriah-Welsh 44)
Haiti 6 (Jean 4, Saba 9, Antoine 38, Etienne 41, 43, Christophe 80)

Jun 11 – Santo Domingo
Montserrat 3 (Taylor 47 pen, 85, Clifton 67)
Bermuda 2 (Clemons 54, Wells 78)

Jun 14 – Santo Domingo
Haiti 6 (Christian 39, Prunier 48, 76, Simonsen 63, Antoine 87, 89)
Guyana 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Haiti	4	3	1	0	15	4	10
Guyana	4	2	0	2	6	14	6
Montserrat	3	1	0	2	6	7	3
Bermuda	3	0	1	2	3	5	1

Group B3

Jun 3 – Nassau
Bahamas 1 (St. Fleur 68 pen)
St. Vincent & Grenadines 0

Jun 3 – Managua
Nicaragua 2 (Quijano 45+1, Bonilla 78)
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Reyes 46 og)

Jun 6 – Arnos Vale
St. Vincent & Grenadines 2 (Solomon 3, Anderson 45+5)
Nicaragua 2 (Bonilla 22, Moldskred 41)

Jun 6 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Hackshaw 4)
Bahamas 0

Jun 10 – Arnos Vale
St. Vincent & Grenadines 0
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Hackshaw 17, L. Garcia 25)

Jun 10 – Nassau
Bahamas 0
Nicaragua 2 (Moreno 40, Moldskred 90+1)

Jun 13 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 4 (J. Garcia 9, Powder 11, 41, Rochford 90+1)
St. Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Stewart 26)

Jun 13 – Managua
Nicaragua 4 (Barrera 19 pen, Moreno 34, 45, Smith 74 pen)
Bahamas 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nicaragua	4	3	1	0	10	3	10
Trinidad & Tobago	4	3	0	1	8	3	9
Bahamas	4	1	0	3	1	7	3
St. Vincent & G.	4	0	1	3	3	9	1

Group B4

Jun 2 – Remire-Montjoly
French Guiana 2 (Sarrucco 9, Nemouthe 41)
Guatemala 0

Jun 2 – Belmopan
Belize 0
Dominican Republic 2 (Lopez 20, Romero 67)

Jun 5 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 2 (Nemhard 10 og, Mejia 75 pen)
Belize 0

Jun 5 – Santo Domingo
Dominican Republic 2 (Romero 20, Lopez 51)
French Guiana 3 (Sarrucco 16, Baal 71, Abelinti 78)

Jun 9 – Belmopan
Belize 1 (Avila 74)
French Guiana 1 (89)

Jun 10 – Santo Domingo
Dominican Republic 1 (Lorenzo 12)
Guatemala 1 (Santis 26)

Jun 13 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 2 (Mendez 32, 78 pen)
Dominican Republic 0

Jun 14 – Remire-Montjoly
French Guiana 1 (Sarrucco 80)
Belize 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
French Guiana	4	3	1	0	7	3	10
Guatemala	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Dominican Republic	4	1	1	2	5	6	4
Belize	4	0	1	3	1	6	1

Group C1

Jun 3 – Willemstad
Sint Maarten 1 (Gerritsen 83)
US Virgin Islands 1 (Mack 8)

Jun 3 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos Islands 1 (Shand Jr. 86)
Bonaire 4 (Cicilia 5, 16, 80, Libania 57)

Jun 6 – Willemstad
Bonaire 2 (Libania 9, Hoeve 18)
Sint Maarten 2 (Kerssies 27, Hoeve 32 og)

Jun 6 – Saint Croix
US Virgin Islands 3 (Browne 19, Mills 77, Mack 90+6 pen)
Turks & Caicos Islands 2 (Paul 45+3, Farrell 56 og)

Jun 11 – Saint Croix
US Virgin Islands 0
Bonaire 2 (Cicilia 81, Isenia 84)

Jun 11 – Willemstad
Sint Maarten 8 (Lake 2, 18, 44, 65, Hughes 14, 63, Gerritsen 68 pen, Jacobs 90+4)
Turks & Caicos Islands 2 (Forbes 37, 45+3)

Jun 14 – Willemstad
Bonaire 2 (Cicilia 4, Sonnenschien 33)
US Virgin Islands 0

Jun 14 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos Islands 2 (Paul 48, 70)
Sint Maarten 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bonaire	4	3	1	0	10	3	10
Sint Martin	4	1	2	1	11	7	5
US Virgin Islands	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Turks & Caicos	4	1	0	3	7	15	3

Group C2

Jun 3 – The Valley
Saint Martin 0
Aruba 0

Jun 6 – Willemstad
Aruba 3 (Groothusen 25, 35, Maria 45+2)
Saint Martin 0

Jun 9 – Willemstad
Aruba 2 (Breinburg 55 pen, Jimenez 90+5)
St. Kitts & Nevis 3 (Berie 6, Sterling-James 32, Nelson 83)

Jun 12 – Basseterre
St. Kitts & Nevis 1 (Clarke 90+2)
Saint Martin 1 (Arne 34)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aruba	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
St. Kitts & Nevis	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Saint-Martin	3	0	2	1	1	4	2

Group C3

Jun 2 – The Valley
Anguilla 0
Dominica 0

Jun 5 – Basseterre
Dominica 1 (Wade 4)
Anguilla 1 (Guishard 57)

Jun 9 – Roseau
Dominica 0
Saint Lucia 1 (Macfarlane 54)

Jun 12 – Gros Islet
Saint Lucia 2 (Remy 44, Frederick 60)
Anguilla 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint Lucia	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Dominica	3	0	2	1	1	2	2
Anguilla	3	0	2	1	1	3	2

Group C4

Jun 3 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 1 (Caesar 63)
Cayman Islands 1 (Conolly 82)

Jun 6 – George Town
Cayman Islands 1 (J. Ebanks 25 pen)
British Virgin Islands 1 (Wilson 46)

Jun 9 – George Town
Cayman Islands 0
Puerto Rico 3 (Angking 23, 64 pen, Valentin 84)

Jun 12 – Mayaguez
Puerto Rico 6 (Rios 12, R. Rivera 15 pen, 39, 49, 51, G. Diaz 31)
British Virgin Islands 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Puerto Rico	2	2	0	0	9	0	6
Cayman Islands	3	0	2	1	2	5	2
British Virgin Islands	3	0	2	1	2	8	2

2023 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Third Round

Group A

Jun 8 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 1 (Nasser 41)
Indonesia 2 (Klok 44 pen, Rachmat 46)

Jun 8 – Kuwait City
Jordan 2 (Olwan 69, Al Dardour 82 pen)
Nepal 0

Jun 11 – Kuwait City
Nepal 1 (D. Gurung 90+4)
Kuwait 4 (Al Rashidi 28, Nasser 48, 70, Al Faneeni 73)

Jun 11 – Kuwait City
Indonesia 0
Jordan 1 (Al Naimat 48)

Jun 14 – Kuwait City
Jordan 3 (Olwan 62, Al Mardi 89, Al Rawabdeh 90+5)
Kuwait 0

Jun 14 – Kuwait City
Indonesia 7 (Dimas 6, Witan 43, 81, Fachruddin 54, Saddil 55, Baggot 80, Marselino 90)
Nepal 0

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jordan (Q)	3	3	0	0	6	0	9
Indonesia (Q)	3	2	0	1	9	2	6
Kuwait	3	1	0	2	5	6	3
Nepal	3	0	0	3	1	13	0

Group B

Jun 8 – Ulaanbaatar
Philippines 0
Yemen 0

Jun 8 – Ulaanbaatar
Palestine 1 (Dabbagh 85 pen)
Mongolia 0

Jun 11 – Ulaanbaatar
Yemen 0
Palestine 5 (Dabbagh 14, Rashid 45+2, Yameen 47, Chihadeh 58, Al Wajih 64 og)

Jun 11 – Ulaanbaatar
Mongolia 0
Philippines 1 (Holtmann 90+3)

Jun 14 – Ulaanbaatar
Yemen 0
Mongolia 2 (G. Ganbold 8, 53)

Jun 14 – Ulaanbaatar
Palestine 4 (Chihadeh 31, Seyam 42, Yameen 55, Abu Warda 72)
Philippines 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palestine (Q)	3	3	0	0	10	0	9
Philippines	3	1	1	1	1	4	4
Mongolia	3	1	0	2	2	2	3
Yemen	3	0	1	2	0	7	1

Group C

Jun 8 – Namangan
Thailand 3 (Sarach 40, Teerasil 45+2, Pansa 80)
Maldives 0

Jun 8 – Namangan
Uzbekistan 3 (Masharipov 36, Khamdamov 48, Safiyev 61)
Sri Lanka 0

Jun 11 – Namangan
Maldives 0
Uzbekistan 4 (Shomurodov 2, 51, 80, Urunov 86)

Jun 11 – Namangan
Sri Lanka 0
Thailand 2 (Thitiphan 34, Worachit 90+5)

Jun 14 – Namangan
Maldives 1 (Mohamed 63)
Sri Lanka 0

Jun 14 – Namangan
Uzbekistan 2 (Masharipov 8, Turgunboev 23)
Thailand 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uzbekistan (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	0	9
Thailand (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	2	6
Maldives	3	1	0	2	1	7	3
Sri Lanka	3	0	0	3	0	6	0

Group D

Jun 8 – Kolkata
Hong Kong 2 (Wong Wai 23, Orr 27)
Afghanistan 1 (Noor 81)

Jun 8 – Kolkata
India 2 (Chhetri 14 pen, 60)
Cambodia 0

Jun 11 – Kolkata
Afghanistan 1 (Zu. Amiri 88)
India 2 (Chhetri 86, Samad 90+1)

Jun 11 – Kolkata
Cambodia 0
Hong Kong 3 (Orr 19, Sun Ming Him 21, Chan Siu Kwan 63)

Jun 14 – Kolkata
Afghanistan 2 (Shayesteh 16, Zazai 35)
Cambodia 2 (Thiva 37, Sokpheng 81)

Jun 14 – Kolkata
India 4 (Ali 1, Chhetri 45+1, M. Singh 85, Pandita 90+3)
Hong Kong 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
India (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	1	9
Hong Kong (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	5	6
Afghanistan	3	0	1	2	4	6	1
Cambodia	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group E

Jun 8 – Kuala Lumpur
Turkmenistan 1 (Annadurdyyew 37)
Malaysia 3 (Safawi 11, Faisal 16, Corbin-Ong 45+2)

Jun 8 – Kuala Lumpur
Bahrain 2 (Haram 34, Al Aswad 42)
Bangladesh 0

Jun 11 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 1 (Sumareh 55)
Bahrain 2 (Haram 57, Helal 81 pen)

Jun 11 – Kuala Lumpur
Bangladesh 1 (Ibrahim 12)
Turkmenistan 2 (Annadurdyyew 7, Amanow 77)

Jun 14 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 4 (Safawi 16 pen, Cools 38, Syafiq 47, Lok 73)
Bangladesh 1 (Ibrahim 31)

Jun 14 – Kuala Lumpur
Bahrain 1 (Helal 23 pen)
Turkmenistan 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bahrain (Q)	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Malaysia (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	4	6
Turkmenistan	3	1	0	2	3	5	3
Bangladesh	3	0	0	3	2	8	0

Group F

Jun 8 – Bishkek
Tajikistan 4 (Mabatshoev 9, 57, Dzhalilov 56 pen, Panjshanbe 84)
Myanmar 0

Jun 8 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Kichin 77 pen, Maier 82)
Singapore 1 (Song Ui-young 57)

Jun 11 – Bishkek
Myanmar 0
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Maier 25, 45)

Jun 11 – Bishkek
Singapore 0
Tajikistan 1 (Mabatshoev 53)

Jun 14 – Bishkek
Myanmar 2 (Win Naing Tun 53, Aung Kaung Mann 66)
Singapore 6 (Ikhsan 9, 54, 69, Song Ui-young 16, Quak 42, Hafiz 89)

Jun 14 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 0
Tajikistan 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tajikistan (Q)	3	2	1	0	5	0	7
Kyrgyzstan (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Singapore	3	1	0	2	7	5	3
Myanmar	3	0	0	3	2	12	0

2023 AFCON QUALIFIERS

Group A

Jun 9 – Agadir
Guinea-Bissau 5 (Semedo 40, Gano 50, 58, Banjaqui 80, Jorginho 87)
Sao Tome e Principe 1 (Viegas 21)

Jun 9 – Abuja
Nigeria 2 (Iwobi 16, Osimhen 41)
Sierra Leone 1 (Morsay 11)

Jun 13 – Agadir
Sao Tome e Principe 0
Nigeria 10 (Osimhen 9, 48, 65, 84, Simon 28, Moffi 43, 60, Etebo 55, Lookman 63, Dennis 90+2 pen)

Jun 13 – Conakry
Sierra Leone 2 (Kargbo 78, Mu. Kamara 87)
Guinea-Bissau 2 (Jorginho 49, 52)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria	2	2	0	0	12	1	6
Guinea-Bissau	2	1	1	0	7	3	4
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Sao Tome e Principe	2	0	0	2	1	15	0

Group B

Jun 3 – Lome
Togo 2 (Placca 20, Laba 87)
Eswatini 2 (Ndzinisa 84, Ngwenya 90+5)

Jun 3 – Marrakesh
Burkina Faso 2 (Bande 58, D. Ouattara 88)
Cape Verde 0

Jun 7 – Johannesburg
Eswatini 1 (Ndzinisa 64)
Burkina Faso 3 (D. Ouattara 69, 75, Aziz Ki 85)

Jun 7 – Marrakesh
Cape Verde 2 (J. Tavares 10, Monteiro 90+4)
Togo 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Cape Verde	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Togo	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Eswatini	2	0	1	1	3	5	1

Group C

Jun 4 – Johannesburg
Namibia 1 (Shalulie 10)
Burundi 1 (Bimenyimana 88)

Jun 9 – Dar es Salaam
Burundi 0
Cameroon 1 (Toko Ekambi 30)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Burundi	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Namibia	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Kenya*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Kenya disqualified*

Group D

Jun 5 – Lilongwe
Malawi 2 (Mhango 10 pen, 34 pen)
Ethiopia 1 (Nassir 68 pen)

Jun 5 – Cairo
Egypt 1 (Mohamed 87)
Guinea 0

Jun 9 – Conakry
Guinea 1 (Keita 90+1)
Malawi 0

Jun 9 – Lilongwe
Ethiopia 2 (Hotessa 21, Bekele 39)
Egypt 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ethiopia	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Malawi	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Guinea	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Egypt	2	1	0	1	1	2	3

Group E

Jun 1 – Luanda
Angola 2 (Nzola 72, Gelson 76)
Central African Republic 1 (Nlend 32)

Jun 1 – Cape Coast
Ghana 3 (Kudus 53, Afena-Gyan 56, Bukari 86)
Madagascar 0

Jun 5 – Luanda
Central African Republic 1 (Namnganda 41)
Ghana 1 (Kudus 17)

Jun 5 – Antannarivo
Madagascar 1 (Rakotoharimalala 36)
Angola 1 (Gelson 43)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Angola	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Central African Rep	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Madagascar	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

Group F

Jun 4 – Cotonou
Niger 1 (Sosah 26)
Tanzania 1 (Mpole 1)

Jun 4 – Algiers
Algeria 2 (Mandi 28, Belaili 80)
Uganda 0

Jun 8 – Entebbe
Uganda 1 (Karisa 43)
Niger 1 (Sabo 71)

Jun 8 – Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 0
Algeria 2 (Bensebaini 45+2, Amoura 89)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	2	0	4	0	0	6
Niger	2	0	2	2	2	2	2
Tanzania	2	0	1	1	3	3	1
Uganda	2	0	1	1	3	3	1

Group G

Jun 4 – Thies
Gambia 1 (A. Jallow 45+4)
South Sudan 0

Jun 4 – Bamako
Mali 4 (Camara 1, E. Toure 11, 40, Coulibaly 44)
Congo 0

Jun 8 – Brazzaville
Congo 1 (Makoumbou 74)
Gambia 0

Jun 9 – Entebbe
South Sudan 1 (Kouyate 29 og)
Mali 3 (Camara 59, Koita 90+3, Dieng 90+5)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
Congo	2	1	0	1	1	4	3
Gambia	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
South Sudan	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group H

Jun 3 – Moroni
Comoros 2 (M'Changama 59, Youssouf 81)
Lesotho 0

Jun 3 – Yamassoukro
Ivory Coast 3 (Aurier 67, Kouame 76, Sangare 89)
Zambia 1 (Daka 90+4)

Jun 7 – Lusaka
Zambia 2 (Mwepu 45+2, K. Kangwa 88)
Comoros 1 (Ben 13)

Jun 9 – Johannesburg
Lesotho 0
Ivory Coast 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Zambia	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Comoros	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Lesotho	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

Group I

Jun 4 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 0
Gabon 1 (Babicka 23)

Jun 4 – Nouakchott
Mauritania 3 (Kamara 27 pen, 30, Mahmoud 77)
Sudan 0

Jun 8 – Franceville
Gabon 0
Mauritania 0

Jun 8 – Omdurman
Sudan 2 (Al Shoala 16, Abdelrahman 86)
DR Congo 1 (Bolingi 90+3)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mauritania	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
Gabon	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Sudan	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
DR Congo	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group J

Jun 1 – Benghazi
Libya 1 (Al Taher 54)
Botswana 0

Jun 2 – Tunis
Tunisia 4 (Sliti 56, Jaziri 77, Msakni 80, 85)
Equatorial Guinea 0

Jun 5 – Francistown
Botswana 0
Tunisia 0

Jun 6 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 2 (Al Tuhami 51 og, Bikoro 83 pen)
Libya 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	2	1	1	0	4	0	4
Equatorial Guinea	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Libya	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Botswana	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group K

Jun 9 – Rabat
Morocco 2 (En-Nesyri 51, El Kaabi 88)
South Africa 1 (Foster 8)

Jun 13 – Casablanca
Liberia 0
Morocco 2 (Fajr 56 pen, En-Nesyri 57)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
South Africa	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Liberia	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Zimbabwe*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Zimbabwe disqualified*

Group L

Jun 2 – Johannesburg
Mozambique 1 (Ratifo 67)
Rwanda 1 (Nishimwe 65)

Jun 4 – Dakar
Senegal 3 (Mane 12 pen, 22, 60 pen)
Benin 1 (Olaitan 88)

Jun 7 – Dakar
Rwanda 0
Senegal 1 (Mane 90+8 pen)

Jun 8 – Cotonou
Benin 0
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 38)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Mozambique	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Rwanda	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Benin	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

KIRIN CUP 2022

Semi-Finals

Jun 10 – Kobe
Chile 0
Tunisia 2 (Abdi 41, Jebali 89)

Jun 10 – Kobe
Japan 4 (Yamane 29, Mitoma 45+1, Kubo 73, Maeda 82)
Ghana 1 (J. Ayew 44)

Third-Place Play-Off

Jun 14 – Osaka
Chile 0
Ghana 0
Ghana win 3-1 on penalties

Final

Jun 14 – Osaka
Japan 0
Tunisia 3 (Ben Romdhane 55 pen, Sassi 76, Jebali 90+3)

FRIENDLIES

Apr 25 – San Jose
El Salvador 0
Guatemala 4 (Morales 25, Santis 54, 58, Robles 75)

May 27 – Sisaket
Thailand 1 (Adisak 88)
Turkmenistan 0

May 28 – Doha
India 0
Jordan 2 (Abu Amara 75, Abu Zurayq 90)

May 29 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 1 (Mabkhout 38 pen)
Gambia 1 (M. Barrow 48)

May 29 – Texas
Mexico 2 (Gimenez 12, Troost-Ekong 56 og)
Nigeria 1 (Dessers 54)

May 31 – Pathum Thani
Thailand 1 (Teerasil 4 pen)
Bahrain 2 (Al Khatal 45+1, Issa 90+1)

Jun 1 – Soreang
Indonesia 0
Bangladesh 0

Jun 1 – Ta' Qali
Malta 0
Venezuela 1 (Rondon 34)

Jun 1 – Al Wakrah
Australia 2 (Wright 40, Mabil 68)
Jordan 1 (Al Tamari 17)

Jun 2 – Cincinnati
United States 3 (Aaronson 26, Weah 32, Wright 64 pen)
Morocco 0

Jun 2 – Sapporo
Japan 4 (Asano 36, Kamada 42, Mitoma 60, Tanaka 85)
Paraguay 1 (Gonzalez 59)

Jun 2 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Hwang Ui-jo 31)
Brazil 5 (Richarlison 7, Neymar 42 pen, 57 pen, Coutinho 80, G. Jesus 90)

Jun 3 – New Jersey
Ecuador 1 (Estupinan 3)
Nigeria 0

Jun 3 – Arizona
Mexico 0
Uruguay 3 (Vecino 35, Cavani 46, 54)

Jun 5 – Cornella de Llobregat
Peru 1 (Lapadula 69)
New Zealand 0

Jun 5 – Murcia
Saudi Arabia 0
Colombia 1 (Santos Borre 9)

Jun 5 – Pamplona
Argentina 5 (Messi 8 pen, 45, 47, 71, 76)
Estonia 0

Jun 5 – Kansas City
United States 0
Uruguay 0

Jun 6 – Chicago
Mexico 0
Ecuador 0

Jun 6 – Tokyo
Japan 0
Brazil 1 (Neymar 77 pen)

Jun 6 – Daejeon
South Korea 2 (Hwang Hee-chan 12, Son Heung-min 90)
Chile 0

Jun 9 – Al Rayyan
Oman 0
New Zealand 0

Jun 9 – Murcia
Saudi Arabia 0
Venezuela 1 (Ferraresi 37)

Jun 9 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Iceland 1 (Thrandarson 11)

Jun 10 – Suwon
South Korea 2 (Son Heung-min 66, Jung Woo-young 90+3)
Paraguay 2 (Almiron 23, 49)

Jun 12 – Fort Lauderdale
Ecuador 1 (J. Caicedo 38 pen)
Cape Verde 0

Jun 12 – Doha
Iran 1 (Jahanbakhsh 64)
Algeria 2 (Benayad 43, Amoura 82)

Jun 13 – Tirana
Albania 0
Estonia 0

Jun 14 – Seoul
South Korea 4 (Hwang Ui-Jo 16, Kim Young-Gwon 21, Cho Gue-Sung 85, Kwon Chang-Hoon 90+1)
Egypt 1 (Mohamed 37)

Club football AFRICA

Final Tables 2021-22

ALGERIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CR Belouizdad (C)	34	21	7	6	54	22	70
JS Kabylie	34	16	13	5	40	20	61
Saoura	34	17	9	8	59	24	60
USM Alger	34	15	12	7	45	22	57
CS Constantine	34	15	10	9	46	29	55
Paradou AC	34	16	6	12	43	36	54
ES Setif	34	15	9	10	43	24	54
MC Alger	34	13	12	9	36	24	51
ASO Chlef	34	13	11	10	38	31	50
US Biskra	34	13	11	10	36	32	50
MC Oran	34	10	16	8	32	29	46
Chelghoum Laid	34	11	12	11	40	41	45
NC Magra	34	13	6	15	31	36	45
RC Arbaa	34	10	13	11	40	45	43
Olympique Medea (R)	34	10	6	18	33	53	36
NA Hussein Dey (R)	34	5	7	22	33	66	22
Relizane (R)	34	4	8	22	31	87	20
WA Tlemcen (R)	34	3	4	27	13	72	13

BOTSWANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gaborone United (C)	30	22	6	2	62	13	72
Township Rollers	30	20	6	4	46	17	66
Galaxy	30	20	1	9	68	33	61
Orapa United	30	17	7	6	52	25	58
BDF XI	30	15	7	8	39	29	52
Security Systems	30	12	11	7	49	36	47
Sua Flamingoes	30	12	11	7	46	34	47
Police XI	30	12	7	11	36	33	43
Extension Gunners	30	12	2	16	43	53	38
Morupule Wanderers	30	10	7	13	35	41	37
Masitaoka	30	8	11	11	35	35	35
Mogoditshane Fighters	30	7	6	17	30	54	27
Prisons XI	30	6	7	17	30	70	25
Notwane (R)	30	5	5	20	24	56	20
Gilport Lions (R)	30	4	7	19	23	55	19
MR Highlanders (R)	30	4	7	19	23	57	19

CONGO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Otoho d'Oyo (C)	26	17	8	1	41	13	59
Diables Noirs	26	15	8	3	39	20	53
Leopards de Dolisie	26	14	8	4	43	20	50
Inter Club	26	12	7	7	28	18	43
CARA Brazzaville	26	10	9	7	22	20	39
JS Talangai	26	11	4	11	22	27	37
Vita Club de Mokanda	26	10	6	10	27	26	36
Etoile du Congo	26	9	8	9	24	29	35
Kondzo	26	7	12	7	37	25	33
Cheminots	26	4	12	10	19	27	24
Nathaly's	26	5	8	13	11	32	23
Nouvelle Generation	26	6	3	17	24	42	21
Patronage Sainte-Anne*	26	5	5	16	18	41	20
Nico-Nicoye (R)	26	4	8	14	14	29	20

**Patronage Sainte-Anne enter the relegation play-off*

ESWATINI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Royal Leopards (C)	30	21	6	3	72	19	69
Highlanders	30	20	7	3	64	25	67
Mbabane Swallows	30	20	5	5	51	22	65
Young Buffaloes	30	19	7	4	71	21	64
Tambankulu Callies	30	12	8	10	37	37	44
Manzini Wanderers	30	10	10	10	44	41	40
Vovovo	30	9	11	10	41	42	38
Manzini Sea Birds	30	11	5	14	45	44	38
Green Mamba	30	9	10	11	38	46	37
Moneni Pirates	30	9	8	13	31	46	35
Denver	30	10	4	16	28	38	34
Tambuti	30	8	6	16	32	62	30
Milling Hotspurs	30	6	11	13	25	43	29
Rangers	30	7	6	17	24	54	27
Tinyosi (R)	30	5	8	17	21	48	23
Malanti Chiefs (R)	30	5	6	19	29	65	21

MADAGASCAR

North

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fosa Juniors*	14	12	2	0	36	10	38
Fanalamanga*	14	5	5	4	15	13	20
COSFA*	14	5	5	4	15	16	20
Ajesaia*	14	6	2	6	23	18	20
USCA Foot	14	5	4	5	23	20	19
Jet Kintana	14	3	6	5	14	20	15
Tia Kitra	14	3	4	7	13	29	13
Five (R)	14	1	4	9	8	21	7

**Qualify for the Final Stages*

South

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Elgeco Plus*	14	7	7	0	28	14	28
CFFA*	14	8	4	2	23	10	28
CS-Disciples*	14	6	4	4	27	17	22
Dato FC*	14	5	6	3	14	14	21
Zanak'Ala	14	5	4	5	18	17	19
Mama FCA	14	4	4	6	9	15	16
3FB Toliara	14	1	5	8	16	34	8
JF Capricorne (R)	14	1	4	9	14	28	7

**Qualify for the Final Stages*

Final Stages

Quarter-Finals

Apr 9: Ajesaia 0-0 Elgeco Plus; Dato FC 1-1 Fosa Juniors; COSFA 0-0 CFFA; CS-Disciples 0-0 Fanalamanga
Apr 22-23: Elgeco Plus 1-2 Ajesaia (agg 1-2); Fosa Juniors 0-0 Dato FC (agg 1-1p); CFFA 1-0 COSFA (agg 1-0); Fanalamanga 0-1 CS-Disciples (agg 0-1)

Semi-Finals

May 6-7: Ajesaia 1-1 CS-Disciples; Dato FC 1-1 CFFA
May 20-21: CS-Disciples 1-1 Ajesaia (agg 2-2p); CFFA 1-0 Dato FC (agg 2-1)

Final

Jun 11: Ajesaia 0-3 CFFA

SENEGAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Casa Sport (C)	26	12	11	3	30	17	47
Jaraaf	26	12	9	5	29	17	45
Generation Foot	26	11	9	6	34	18	42
Guediawaye	26	11	8	7	29	28	41
Douanes	26	11	5	10	20	23	38
Pikine	26	9	10	7	28	22	37
Teungueth	26	8	12	6	28	20	36
Diambars	26	9	7	10	23	18	34
DSC	26	7	11	8	16	15	32
La Linguere	26	7	10	9	14	18	31
CNEPS Excellence	26	8	6	12	15	25	30
Goree	26	7	8	11	17	24	29
ASEC Ndiambour (R)	26	6	8	12	14	29	26
Mbour Petite Cote (R)	26	4	6	16	13	36	18

SIERRA LEONE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bo Rangers (C)	34	25	3	6	53	17	78
East End Lions	34	17	11	6	42	22	62
Wusum Stars	34	14	10	10	33	32	52
Mighty Blackpool	34	13	11	10	33	31	50
Kallon	34	13	10	11	44	24	49
Kamboi Eagles	34	12	11	11	41	39	47
East End Tigers	34	11	11	12	29	35	44
Ports Authority	34	11	11	12	19	25	44
Central Parade	34	12	8	14	25	45	44
Diamond Stars	34	12	6	16	34	30	42
Bai Bureh Warriors	34	11	9	14	29	29	42

Freetown City	34	10	12	12	24	26	42
Johansen	34	10	12	12	22	26	42
SLIFA Mount Aureol	34	10	12	12	30	35	42
Old Edwardians (R)	34	9	14	11	28	28	41
RSLAF (R)	34	8	14	12	19	27	38
Anti Drugs Strikers (R)	34	9	11	14	23	34	38
Police (R)	34	6	10	18	21	44	28

SOUTH AFRICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns (C)	30	19	8	3	56	20	65
Cape Town City	30	12	13	5	32	24	49
Royal AM	30	12	11	7	43	31	47
Stellenbosch	30	11	14	5	32	23	47
Kaizer Chiefs	30	13	8	9	34	26	47
Orlando Pirates	30	10	14	6	34	28	44
AmaZulu	30	8	17	5	24	22	41
SuperSport United	30	10	10	10	36	32	40
Golden Arrows	30	9	13	8	35	40	40
Marumo Gallants	30	7	13	10	22	28	34
Sekhukhune United	30	8	9	13	21	24	33
Maritzburg United	30	7	10	13	22	33	31
TS Galaxy	30	7	9	14	22	38	30
Chippa United	30	5	14	11	22	34	29
Swallows*	30	4	14	12	22	36	26
Baroka (R)	30	6	7	17	22	40	25

*Swallows enter the relegation play-off

Relegation Play-Off

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Swallows*	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
University of Pretoria	4	1	2	1	4	3	5
Cape Town All Stars	4	1	1	2	5	7	4

*Swallows remain in the Premier Division

TOGO

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dynamic Togolais*	14	8	5	1	22	6	29
Gomido*	14	8	4	2	19	11	28
Togo Port*	14	6	6	2	14	11	24
Entente II	14	6	5	3	13	8	23
OTR	14	4	6	4	16	15	18
Gbohloe-su des lacs	14	2	5	7	13	17	11
Anges Notse	14	2	4	8	10	22	10
Kotoko (R)	14	1	3	10	9	26	6

*Qualify for the Championship Round

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASKO de Kara*	14	10	4	0	23	5	34
Kara*	14	7	6	1	22	7	27
Binah*	14	6	4	4	17	17	22
Unisport	14	5	5	4	13	11	20
Sara Sport	14	3	5	6	13	21	14
Kakadl	14	2	6	6	12	17	12
Semassi	14	3	2	9	10	22	11
Ifodje (R)	14	1	6	7	5	15	9

*Qualify for the Championship Round

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASKO de Kara (C)	10	6	4	0	16	4	22
Kara	10	6	0	4	17	9	18
Dynamic Togolais	10	3	4	3	8	10	13
Gomido	10	2	5	3	8	13	11
Binah	10	2	3	5	8	14	9
Togo Port	10	2	2	6	7	14	8

ASIA

Final Tables 2021-22

IRAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esteghlal (C)	30	19	11	0	39	10	68
Persepolis	30	18	9	3	43	21	63
Sepahan	30	16	8	6	43	21	56
Gol Gohar	30	13	12	5	37	28	51
Foolad	30	13	10	7	30	22	49
Mes Rafsanjan	30	12	9	9	39	28	45
Aluminium Arak	30	7	16	7	20	23	37
Zob Ahan	30	10	7	13	21	25	37
Paykan	30	7	15	8	26	27	36
Sanat Naft	30	9	9	12	26	30	36
Havadar	30	8	10	12	18	25	34
Nassaji Mazandaran	30	6	15	9	24	34	33
Tractor	30	7	10	13	26	32	31
Naft Masjed Soleyman	30	3	13	14	14	35	22
Fajr Sepasi (R)	30	2	11	17	10	29	17
Padideh Khorasan (R)	30	2	11	17	17	43	17

SOUTH AMERICA

BOLIVIA

2022 Apertura Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Palmaflor*	16	9	1	6	18	21	28
The Strongest*	16	7	6	3	21	11	27
Nacional Potosi*	16	7	4	5	31	24	25
Oriente Petrolero*	16	6	4	6	22	22	22
Guabira	16	5	4	7	17	21	19
Real Santa Cruz	16	5	3	8	22	28	18
Aurora	16	4	5	7	18	21	17
Universitario de Sucre	16	4	4	8	17	22	16

*Qualify for the Apertura Final Stages

2022 Apertura Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar*	16	12	1	3	42	9	37
Blooming*	16	8	3	5	27	30	27
Royal Pari*	16	6	5	5	32	26	23
Always Ready*	16	5	4	7	24	22	19
Universitario de Vinto	16	5	4	7	18	29	19
Jorge Wilstermann	16	4	6	6	16	20	18
Independiente Petrolero	16	4	6	6	17	26	18
Real Tomayapo	16	4	6	6	14	24	18

*Qualify for the Apertura Final Stages

2022 Apertura Final Stages

Quarter-Finals

May 28-30: Nacional Potosi 3-1 Blooming; Always Ready 2-1 Atletico Palmaflor; Royal Pari 0-3 The Strongest; Oriente Petrolero 1-0 Bolivar
Jun 1-3: Blooming 2-0 Nacional Potosi (agg p3-3); Atletico Palmaflor 2-1 Always Ready (agg p3-3); The Strongest 4-0 Royal Pari (agg 7-0); Bolivar 1-0 Oriente Petrolero (agg p1-1)

Semi-Finals

Jun 4-5: The Strongest 2-1 Atletico Palmaflor; Blooming 2-3 Bolivar
Jun 8-9: Atletico Palmaflor 1-2 The Strongest (agg 2-4); Bolivar 4-0 Blooming (agg 7-2)

Final

Jun 12: The Strongest 0-3 Bolivar

ECUADOR

2022 First Stage

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Barcelona SC*	15	9	3	3	24	11	+13	30
Universidad Catolica	15	9	2	4	31	17	+14	29
LDU Quito	15	9	2	4	26	22	+4	29
Independiente del Valle	15	8	3	4	16	12	+4	27
Aucas	15	7	5	3	23	17	+6	26
Emelec	15	6	5	4	23	15	+8	23
Delfin	15	6	4	5	16	18	-2	22
Deportivo Cuenca	15	5	6	4	12	14	-2	21
Gualaceo	15	6	2	7	18	23	-5	20
Mushuc Runa	15	5	4	6	19	21	-2	19
Guayaquil City	15	4	6	5	22	20	+2	18
Orense	15	4	6	5	14	13	+1	18
Macara	15	3	4	8	12	19	-7	13
Cumbaya	15	3	4	8	12	23	-11	13
Tecnico Universitario	15	2	4	9	12	24	-12	10
9 de Octubre	15	1	6	8	15	26	-11	9

*Barcelona SC qualify for the Finals

URUGUAY

2022 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool*	15	10	2	3	21	8	32
Nacional	15	8	4	3	28	10	28
Deportivo Maldonado	15	8	3	4	20	14	27
Boston River	15	8	3	4	20	16	27
Penarol	15	7	5	3	10	6	26
Danubio	15	6	6	3	13	9	24
Fenix	15	7	2	6	15	16	23
River Plate	15	5	6	4	20	15	21
Montevideo Wanderers	15	5	6	4	16	11	21
Defensor Sporting	15	5	5	5	14	16	20
Rentistas**	15	5	1	9	16	21	19
Plaza Colonia	15	2	7	6	12	15	13
City Torque	15	2	7	6	16	20	13
Cerro Largo	15	3	3	9	7	23	12
Albion	15	2	5	8	16	31	11
Cerrito***	15	2	5	8	9	22	8

*Liverpool qualify for the Championship Play-Offs
**Rentistas awarded 3 points
***Cerrito deducted 3 points

CONCACAF

Final Tables 2021-22

GUADELOUPE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
La Gauloise*	18	11	2	5	31	17	53
Phare du Canal*	18	10	4	4	36	15	52
Etoile de Morne-a-l'Eau	18	9	5	4	27	19	50
Jeunesse Evolution	18	8	7	3	22	12	49
Stade Lamentinois	18	7	4	7	25	30	43
Red Star	18	7	2	9	22	32	41
Juventus Sainte-Anne**	18	6	3	9	15	23	38
Sporting Baie-Mahault***	18	5	4	9	22	32	37
Amical Club***	18	4	6	8	14	21	36
Arsenal (R)	18	2	5	11	15	28	29

4 points for a win, 2 points for a draw, 1 point for a defeat
Qualify for the Final Stages
**Juventus Saint-Anne deducted 1 point*
***Enter the relegation play-offs*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Solidarite Scolaire*	18	13	3	2	48	11	60
Gosier*	18	11	6	1	45	11	57
Moulien	18	11	6	1	42	13	57
USBM	18	10	3	5	33	26	51
Siroco Les Abymes	18	8	2	8	29	29	44
Vieux-Habitants	18	6	5	7	29	27	41
CERFA	18	6	4	8	28	35	40
Marquisat**	18	3	4	11	33	55	31
USR Sainte-Rose***	18	3	2	13	10	50	28
Racing Club**** (R)	18	1	1	16	10	50	20

4 points for a win, 2 points for a draw, 1 point for a defeat
Qualify for the Final Stages
**Enter the relegation play-offs*
***USR Sainte-Rose deducted 1 point and enter the relegation play-offs*
****Racing Club deducted 2 points*

GUATEMALA

2021-22 Clausura Final Stages

Quarter-Finals

May 11-13: Santa Lucia 0-3 Comunicaciones; Achuapa 0-1 Municipal; Antigua GFC 1-0 Guastatoya; Coban Imperial 0-0 Malacateco
May 12-15: Comunicaciones 0-0 Santa Lucia (agg 3-0); Municipal 2-0 Achuapa (agg 3-0); Guastatoya 2-0 Antigua GFC (agg 2-1); Malacateco 0-0 Coban Imperial (agg 0-0)
– Malacateco advance after finishing higher in the regular season league table

Semi-Finals

May 18-19: Malacateco 1-1 Comunicaciones; Guastatoya 1-1 Municipal
May 22: Comunicaciones 0-0 Malacateco (agg a1-1); Municipal 1-1 Guastatoya (agg 2-2)
– Municipal advance after finishing higher in the regular season league table

Final

May 26: Municipal 0-1 Comunicaciones
May 30: Comunicaciones 1-0 Municipal (agg 2-0)

JAMAICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Waterhouse*	22	15	4	3	41	18	49
Dunbeholden*	22	13	5	4	31	22	44
Arnett Gardens**	22	12	6	4	39	25	42
Mount Pleasant Academy**	22	12	5	5	38	25	41
Cavalier**	22	10	5	7	28	20	35
Harbour View**	22	7	7	8	26	23	28
Humble Lions	22	6	10	6	23	22	28
Tivoli Gardens	22	7	7	8	29	30	28
Vere United	22	5	5	12	12	21	20
Portmore United	22	5	5	12	15	29	20
Molynes United (R)	22	4	3	15	23	44	15
Montego Bay United (R)	22	2	6	14	15	41	12

*Qualify for the Final Series
**Qualify for the Final Series Play-Offs*

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Paul Ince

Italy 0 England 0

1997, World Cup qualifier, Rome

Paul Ince won 53 caps for England in an international career that featured memorable games at Euro '96 and France '98, but it was a World Cup qualifier in Rome that stands out as the highlight for the former West Ham United, Manchester United, Internazionale, Liverpool, Middlesbrough and Wolves midfielder.

Walking wounded...Ince wears his blood-stained shirt

"The qualifier against Italy in Rome in 1997 will always be the one that stands out for me as my most memorable night in an England shirt.

We needed a point to qualify ahead of the Italians and for a number of reasons the 0-0 draw we secured was such a satisfying result. First of all, I was playing for Inter at the time, so to get the result we needed on Italian soil was fantastic. Secondly, Glenn Hoddle gave me the honour of captaining the team that night and that was massive. To lead my country on a night when we achieved something special meant so much.

Tony Adams could have been captain for that game, but the gaffer picked me and it meant I felt extra pressure, extra responsibility and, ultimately, extra satisfaction at the end.

Clinching qualification was even more significant for that group of players because we didn't make it through the qualifiers for the 1994 finals under Graham Taylor, when Ronald Koeman did us in Rotterdam on a night when he should have been sent off. I still can't get the disappointment of that moment out of my head all these years later.

So it all came down to the game in Rome. I was 29 at the time and I knew that this might be my last chance to get to the World Cup. We had a great coach leading us and it felt like we were within touching distance of a massive opportunity – so long as we got through that final group game.

There were a few scares on the night, but the draw is all we needed and I'll always remember the sense of pride when the final whistle went and we could all celebrate.

We felt that we had a real chance of making a big impact at the finals in France because the team was so strong.

We had David Seaman at his best in goal, Tony Adams, Sol Campbell and Gareth Southgate at the back, Paul Gascoigne, David Beckham and Paul Scholes in midfield and so much attacking talent as well.

Alan Shearer, Teddy Sheringham, Les Ferdinand, Ian Wright, a young Michael Owen and a few more who didn't quite make the cut. What a list that is, by the way. There has rarely been a better generation of England strikers.

France here we come...Ince celebrates with Paul Gascoigne

For me, the 1998 England team was something very special and to a man, we all felt we were good enough to win the World Cup.

It was full of leaders, real characters and winners. It was a team and a squad good enough to win tournaments and I still feel that we would have gone close if we had come through the penalty shootout against Argentina.

We often hear people talking about the England team that followed us with Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard, and they had some incredible players, but I believe the 1998 team were a step ahead of them as we had a few more ticks in our boxes.

France '98 could and should have been our tournament and it still gets to me now that we were denied the chance to achieve what we could have done by a set of circumstances in the Argentina game that took it away from us.

> "France '98 could and should have been our tournament"

That was our year to bring the World Cup back to England and it is one of the big regrets of my career that it didn't happen."

Interview by Kevin Palmer at an event for Paddy Power

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